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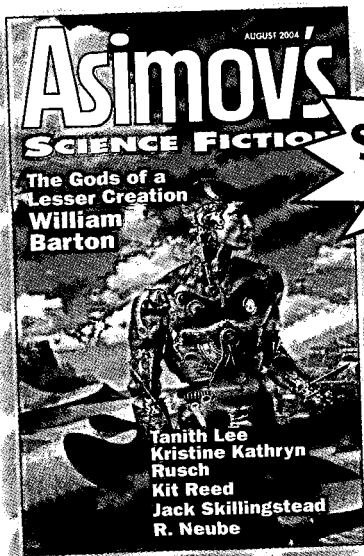
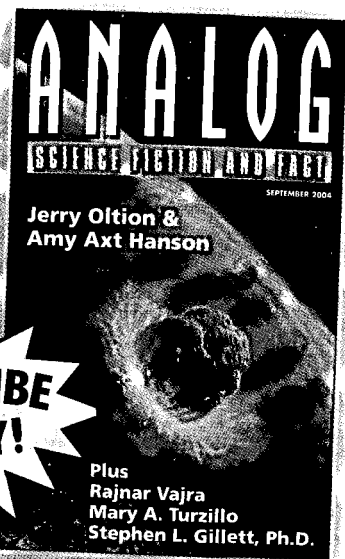
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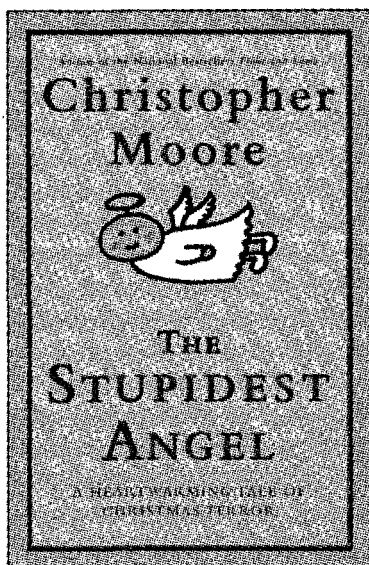
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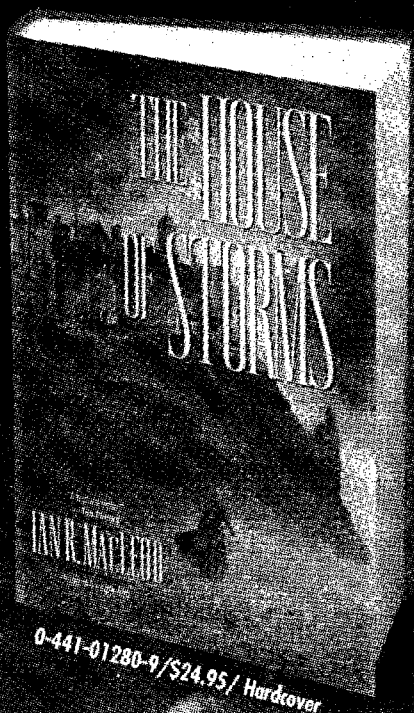
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2005 READERS' AWARDS

Anyone who has read Isaac Asimov's autobiographical material knows that he was not adverse to receiving recognition for his work. He delighted in his Hugos, his Grand Mastership, and in his Nebulas (even if the Science Fiction Writers of America—SFWA—managed to misspell both his first and last names on one of them). In conversation, though, he said that the acceptance and professional publication of a story was an important achievement award as well. The other awards were fun, but they were obviously unobtainable without publication. And there are many stories that once read—"The Ugly Little Boy," "Liar!"—stay with us forever, even if they don't receive award recognition in their own time. By founding *Asimov's* in 1977, Isaac gave other writers another outlet in the shrinking world of SF magazine publishing where they could receive that ultimate recognition.

Asimov's initiated our Readers' Awards in 1987. They give you the chance to let us know what you think of our stories, poetry, and art. It's fun to witness your diverse opinions and to read the notes that you often write on the ballots. In the first years, I counted all the ballots myself, and I've attended all the Readers' Award celebrations. My earliest memories of the award are often tied to thoughts of Isaac.

The first winners were Connie Willis for "Spice Pogrom," James Patrick Kelly for "The Prisoner of

Chillon," and Isaac Asimov for "Robot Dreams." The awards reception was held in a beautiful room overlooking New York City in the United Nations Plaza Hotel. Although "Robot Dreams" was a powerful story, Isaac was embarrassed when he discovered that he'd received an award from his own magazine. We told him, though, that even if it was his magazine, the readers had spoken, and he had to accept their judgment. Isaac refused the small monetary prize that went with the award, so I believe we donated it to the Space Camp. Isaac had had tough competition for the award that year. Second place for short story went to Harlan Ellison and third went to Kim Stanley Robinson.

The awards were held in the same location a year later. That year, the winners included Kim Stanley Robinson for "Mother Goddess of the World," Pat Murphy for "Rachel in Love," and Lawrence Watt-Evans for "Why I Left Harry's All-Night Hamburgers." A special award was given to Harlan Ellison for his film script, *I, Robot: The Movie*, which had been serialized to much acclaim in the magazine. As he was about to give his acceptance speech, Stan Robinson told me he saw Isaac standing across the room. He suddenly realized the debt he owed to the Good Doctor. In his speech, Stan warmly thanked Isaac for his inspiring fiction and nonfiction, which had influenced his own career, and he thanked

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Stories from *Asimov's* have won 41 Hugos and 24 Nebula Awards, and our editors have received 17 Hugo Awards for Best Editor. *Asimov's* was also the 2001 recipient of the Locus Award for Best Magazine.

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him for founding the magazine that has given a home to so many authors. Isaac was very touched by this speech and he never forgot it. Isaac told me he thought it was the first time he had heard a public acknowledgment of his contributions to a younger generation of writers.

After the first two years, we stopped holding the awards on their own weekend in New York City, and began to give them over the Nebula Awards weekend. With the Nebulas, the location of the Readers' Award's celebration moved from city to city. In the spring of 1991, however, the awards, and the Nebulas, returned to New York. On the evening of April 27, James Patrick Kelly and Robert Frazier, who had shared an award for their poem "A Dragon's Yuletide Shopping List" (that year, Jim also won a Readers' Award for his novella, "Mr. Boy"), were standing in the mezzanine of the Grand Hyatt Hotel with Terry Bisson, who had won the Best Short Story award with "Bears Discover Fire." Looking down at the pre-Nebula cocktail party, they spied Isaac. They all thought it would be fun to have him autograph their Readers' Awards, since normally only the editor signed the certificates. Once again, Isaac was delighted. Their timing was perfect, too, because that was the last

Nebula banquet Isaac was ever to attend.

Although Isaac died in April 1992, the previous year's awards are not the last ones that I associate with him. We published some wonderful novellas in 1992, including Lucius Shepard's Hugo-award winning "Barnacle Bill the Spacer" and Isaac Asimov's "Cleon the Emperor"—one of the final chapters in his preeminent Foundation series. The two stories ran neck-and-neck throughout the voting process. On the last day, the final ballot to cross my desk gave a third-place vote (worth one point) to one of the stories. This vote nudged the story into the only tie we ever had for first place. I thought the results would have made Isaac happy. Our readers had found a way to thank a master for his superb tale while continuing to encourage the works of another gifted author.

While the short-fiction markets keep on shrinking, *Asimov's Science Fiction* magazine still provides authors with the opportunity to get their work before their readers. And once again, you have let us know which stories ranked amongst your favorites. This year's Readers' Award winners are listed below. They'll receive their awards at a breakfast party in Chicago during the 2005 Nebula awards weekend. ○

2005 READERS' AWARD WINNERS

BEST NOVELLA

1. **LIBERATION DAY; ALLEN M. STEELE**
2. *Elector*; Charles Stross
3. *Incident at Goat Kill Creek*; Allen M. Steele
4. *Long Voyage Home*; R. Garcia y Robertson (tie)
4. *Under the Flag of Night*; Ian McDowell (tie)

BEST NOVELETTE

1. **THE GARCIA NARROWS BRIDGE; ALLEN M. STEELE**
2. A Change of Mind; Robert Reed
3. Men Are Trouble ; James Patrick Kelly
4. The Third Party; David Moles (tie)
4. Strength Alone; Paul Melko (tie)

BEST SHORT STORY

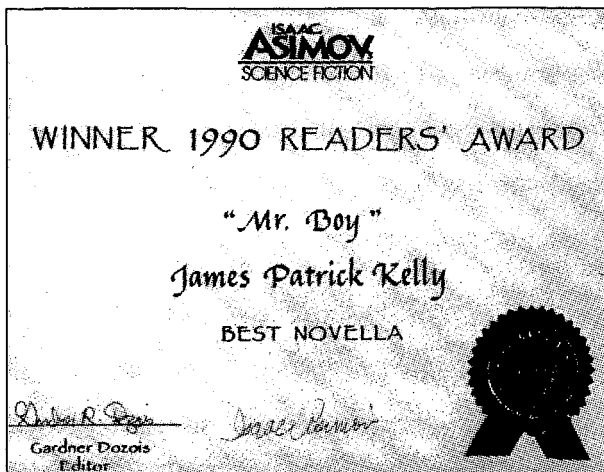
1. **TRAVELS WITH MY CATS; MIKE RESNICK**
2. The Gods of a Lesser Creation; William Barton
3. A Princess of Earth; Mike Resnick
4. Sisyphus and the Stranger; Paul Di Filippo
5. Pulp Cover; Gene Wolfe

BEST POEM

1. **HEAVY WEATHER; BRUCE BOSTON**
2. On Princesses; Laurel Winter
3. Science Fiction Moon; G.O. Clark (tie)
3. Advice on Dealing with Your New Alien Pet; Bruce Boston (tie)
5. Etiquette with Your Robot Husband; Karina and Robert Fabian (tie)
5. The Alien Liked to Cook; Mario Milosevic (tie)

BEST COVER

1. **AUGUST; DONATO GIANCOLA**
2. March; Michael Carroll
3. January; John Allemand
4. September; Dominic Harman
5. April/May; Michael Carroll



REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

TWO WORLDCONS, WORLDS APART

In a few months the World Science Fiction Convention will return to the British Isles; and, Lord willing, so will I, forty-eight years after my first visit to that green and pleasant land.

I think I know what I can expect from the 2005 Worldcon that is to be held soon in Glasgow—an experience much like the one I had at the first Glasgow Worldcon ten years before, only rather more so. My recollections of Glasgow in 1995 include a pleasant stay on the nineteenth floor of the lofty Hilton Hotel, a bit of whiskey in my breakfast oatmeal and haggis for lunch, a daily jaunt across town to the shimmering, glassy convention center, and having, amid the great throngs of convention-goers, old friends and new, a whirlwind series of encounters not only with British fans and writers but with delegates from former Soviet-bloc countries like Latvia and Poland and the Czech Republic and Ukraine, and visitors from Russia itself, all of them still rarities in the early post-Communist years. At the end of the day there was dinner in one of Glasgow's superb restaurants, and a party at one of the hotels, and perhaps a drop or two of the single malt before bedtime. This time, I suppose, everything will be bigger, shinier, throngier, whirlwindier. I do hope to stay at the Hilton again and to find that the single-malt product is still available, and I will gladly sit down to dine on haggis when the opportunity is presented.

One thing is sure, though: whatever the 2005 Glasgow convention will be like, it won't be remotely similar to the first British Worldcon of all, the one that was held in London in September of 1957. That convention now seems to have taken place in some alternate universe. Those of you whose Worldcon experience is confined to the last ten or fifteen such events would be flabbergasted by the differences between a modern con and that primordial one.

We can start with the attendance figures. I have attended all five of the previous British Worldcons, and I must be one of just ten or twenty people who can make that claim, because there were merely 268 people present at that first one in 1957. (268 attendees, yes: not a typographical error. There will be individual panels at the upcoming Glasgow affair, or autographing lines for the more popular pros, that will have more people than that in attendance.) Attrition of one kind or another must have claimed most of those 268 along the way, and those of us who remember the quaint event out in Leinster Gardens are growing very sparse by now.

Quaint is the right word for it. The venue was the Kings Court Hotel, a very modest affair of Victorian or Edwardian vintage a mile west of Marble Arch. It was my first trip overseas, and London's architecture, primarily of nineteenth-century origin, looked downright medieval to someone like me who

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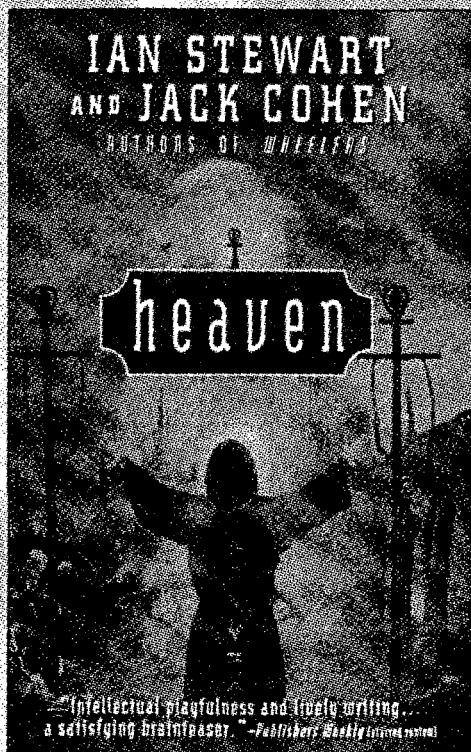
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had grown up in the high-rise glamor of twentieth-century New York. The Kings Court in particular seemed like something out of the middle ages. Everyone who attended the convention stayed in that tiny squalid hostelry, except for those who commuted from their London homes. All the convention events, such as they were, took place there, too, in one small ballroom. (Certain other convention events, the unscheduled kind, took place in the nearby lounge, where beverages of all kinds flowed freely and uninhibited British fans put on displays of public affection that the staid, puritanical American attendees beheld in bemused astonishment.)

The cost of a room at the Kings Court was one pound a night, including breakfast. Let me repeat that, too: *one pound a night*, which then was the equivalent of \$1.40. You must make allowances, of course, for the carnage that half a century of inflation has wreaked on good old sterling: in those days a reasonable salary for a shopgirl or a young clerk was six or seven hundred pounds a year, a local ride on the Underground was sixpence—2.5p in modern British money—and newspapers cost a penny except for posh ones like the *Times*, which might have been tuppence then. Even so, a pound a night for a hotel room was on the low side for the era, so low that when my wife and I hopped over to Paris for a few days during our trip, we simply kept our London room rather than go to the bother of putting our things in storage during our absence.

Of course, the Kings Court was somewhat less than lavish. That pound-a-night fee didn't include heat in one's room, for example. If

you wanted that, you fed one-shilling pieces (think 10p. coins) into a meter on the wall. The Americans at the con, perhaps a third of the total attendance, were utterly unfamiliar with that kind of arrangement, but we quickly learned to keep a stockpile of shillings on hand to get us through the night. Another little hotel amenity to which we Americans were accustomed was a private bath and toilet in each room; but no, no, austerity was still the watchword in an England not yet fully recovered from the hardships of the war, and the Kings Court provided just one or two such chambers on each floor, giving us a nice little lesson in old-world privation.

Then there was the matter of breakfast: toast, sausages, eggs, cornflakes. No problem there, except that the toast was prepared the night before and set out on each table in little metal racks, along with bowls of cornflakes. The layout of the hotel was such that the most convenient route from our rooms to the meeting-hall in the evening was through the dining room, but the first time we tried it we were met with anguished cries from the hotel staff: "Please don't walk through here! You'll get dust in the cornflakes!" That became a watchword for the attendees all weekend.

As for the attendees, those brave 268 of the Worldcon Pleistocene who tiptoed past the cornflakes, they included a good many whose names are still familiar today. Among the writers present were Brian Aldiss, Harry Harrison, Arthur C. Clarke, James White, H. Ken Bulmer, E.C. Tubb, John Wyndham, Michael Moorcock, Eric Frank Russell, William F. Temple, H. Beam Piper, and Sam Youd

("John Christopher"). John Brunner—whose death at the 1995 Glasgow convention cast such a tragic pall over that con—was there too, a slender lad of twenty-three. The formidable John W. Campbell, greatest of SF magazine editors, was the Loncon guest of honor. His British counterpart, E.J. ("Ted") Carnell of *New Worlds*, was the convention chairman. Everyone who was anyone in British fandom was on hand, of course, and a good many American fans, too, most of them passengers aboard a chartered flight organized by David A. Kyle of New York.

You would think that the program would have been a busy one, with that many of the era's best-known professionals there. You would be wrong. The day of the round-the-clock multi-track convention program was still far in the future. The one and only event of Loncon's first day, Friday, September 6, was a brief opening ceremony in the evening, followed by a party. Saturday morning nothing was scheduled except a concert of recorded jazz. In the afternoon came the official convention luncheon, featuring brief speeches by many of the con's celebrities—an event made notori-

ous when the famous American fan Forrest J. Ackerman, who had arrived wearing a string necktie of a type commonly worn in the Western United States but unknown in England, was turned away at the door. "The ceremony is to begin with a toast to Her Majesty," Forrie was told. "Gentlemen must wear neckties." His protests that he *was* wearing a necktie were unavailing. (I suppose it's still possible to imagine a ceremony at a modern British convention that includes a toast to the Queen, but one for which neckties of any sort are mandatory is unthinkable today.)

The Hugos were handed out on Saturday night—a brief ceremony, because only three were given, one for best American magazine (Campbell's *Astounding Science Fiction*), one for best British magazine (Carnell's *New Worlds*), and one to *Science-Fiction Times*, the *Locus* of its day. With that rite out of the way, an official of Madame Tussaud's waxworks spoke for half an hour about Britain's first planetarium, and an auction of old SF magazines and magazine illustrations filled in the time until 10:45, when a costume ball got going in the minuscule main hall, followed by the

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traditional masquerade and judging of the costumes. Sunday's program was equally light—more jazz in the morning and the showing of amateur films in the afternoon and a hypnotism demonstration (in which I failed utterly to go into a trance, though some British fans proved hilariously more susceptible). Then, at night, came a film showing ("Mr. Wonderbird") and another auction for collectors.

Monday, the last day, provided the one and only panel of the entire convention—a question-and-answer session featuring half a dozen of the attending pros. After that, John Campbell delivered his guest of honor speech (on psionics, of course, the latest of his many pseudo-scientific obsessions), and the rest of the day was devoted to the sort of mild noodling around (more amateur films, another auction) that had filled most of the weekend.

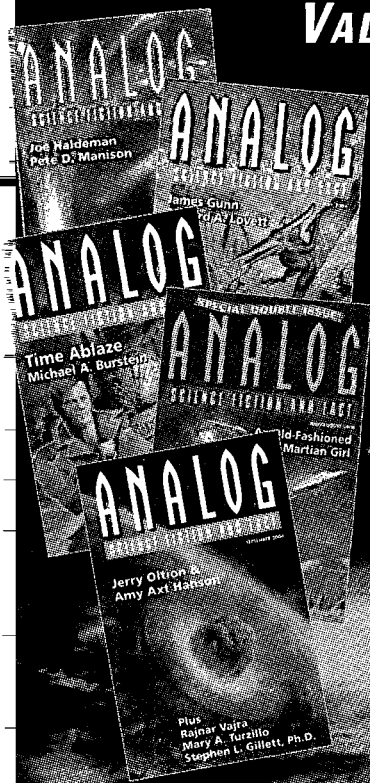
Not much of a program, no. I can't remember much about my own role in it, aside from sitting in on the hypnotism session. I think I was part of that Monday panel, but maybe not. It was all a long time ago and the fifty Worldcons I've attended have begun to blur together beyond repair. My keenest memories of Loncon I have to do with alcohol. Not that I'm a hard-drinking man—which is, in fact, the point. The first episode occurred at a pub called the Globe in Hatton Garden, where on Thursday nights the London SF crowd was wont to gather. Ted Carnell took me to the meeting the night before the con opened, and, when in an injudicious moment I expressed curiosity about British beer, everybody there insisted on buying the young Ameri-

can writer his special favorite. Politely, I tried them all, going way beyond my capacity, and then, at the end of the evening, John Brunner said, grinning diabolically, "But you haven't had barley wine yet, have you?" And coolly foisted a bottle of that high-proof ale on me, a lethal topper that sent me reeling off into the night.

At the convention itself I was inducted into the Order of St. Fantony, a mysterious cult operated by Cheltenham fandom. At the climax of the ceremony the new inductees—I was one of about five—were handed a tall glass of a clear fluid that was described as "water from the sacred well of St. Fantony" and instructed to drain it at a gulp. Which we did; but what the glass contained, I learned a few stunned moments later, was something called Polish white spirits—140-proof vodka. Ah, yes, a quaint little convention.

Quaint, too, were the bizarre sodium lights that cast an eerie orange-yellow glow over the nearby streets of the Bayswater Road and over the prostitutes who thronged there. Prostitution is not unknown in America, of course, but the street-walking kind was uncommon back in that distant age, and I had never seen any right out in the open before. The poor girls were not exactly looking their best under those yellow-orange lights, to put it mildly, and for me the sight of them was, well, a nicely alien experience. Long, long ago, that London Worldcon. I do expect that things will be quite different in Glasgow, where the convention will be ten times as big and the streetlamps won't glow orange. Hold the Polish white spirits and pass the haggis, please. ○

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BRING ON THE DIGITAL HUGOS!

Interaction announced today that in addition to the usual categories, the 2005 Hugos will include an award for Best Web Site

—Press Release from the 63rd
World Science Fiction Convention

déjà vu

Here we go again. You may remember that the very first Hugo for a website was given in 2002 at the San Jose WorldCon. The winner was **Locus Online**. For those of you who came in late, the Science Fiction Achievement Awards, better known as the **Hugos** <<http://www.wsfs.org/hugos.html>>, are voted by past and present members of the WorldCon in a two stage ballot. Nominations for this year's ballot will be closed by the time you read this and the final ballot should be posted on the web. Passports are in order if you want to attend the WorldCon this year: **Interaction** <<http://www.interaction.worldcon.org.uk>> will take place in Glasgow, Scotland, on August 4-8.

The proposed Hugo for Best Website of 2004 is not a "regular" Hugo; it's "special." According to Section 3.3.14 of the **Constitution of the World Science Fiction Society** <<http://www.wsfs.org/bm/const-2002.html#hugo>> "Not more than one special category may be created by the current

Worldcon Committee with nomination and voting to be the same as for the permanent categories. The Worldcon Committee is not required to create any such category; such action by a Worldcon Committee should be under exceptional circumstances only; and the special category created by one Worldcon Committee shall not be binding on following Committees. Awards created under this paragraph shall be considered to be Hugo Awards." Thus, although the committee that ran ConJose in 2002 decided to give the first website Hugo, their experiment did not oblige either **Torcon** <<http://www.torcon3.on.ca>> in 2003 or **Noreascon** <<http://www.noreascon.org>> in 2004 to continue the award—and, in fact, those conventions declined to do so.

exceptional

The phrase that leaps out at me from Section 3.3.14 is "under exceptional circumstances only." Is there anyone out there who considers the world wide web "an exceptional circumstance?" In my twenty-first century, it has become as commonplace as sliced bread and infomercials. Consider that all of the recent WorldCons have used websites as the key tool to communicate with their members. You can

nominate and vote for the Hugos online, register for the masquerade, make your hotel reservations, scope out panels and preview restaurants. No, the exceptional circumstance referred to in Section 3.3.14 aren't the existence of the web. It is that the Hugo awards are now seriously flawed and will become increasingly irrelevant until they are regularly given for websites.

Of course it is no easy thing to change a fannish institution that dates back some fifty years. Change, however, has always been part of the Hugos. The first awards were given in 1953: back then there were only seven categories, some very different from today's: Novel, Professional Magazine, Excellence in Fact Articles, Cover Artist, Interior Illustrator, New SF Author or Artist, and Number One Fan Personality. Movies—later changed to the Dramatic Presentation category to include TV—were not recognized until 1958. And as recently as 2003 the Dramatic Presentation category was divided in two, Long and Short Form, to save **Buffy** <<http://www.buffyguide.com>> from being bludgeoned yet again by the **Lord of the Rings** <<http://www.lordoftherings.net>>.

However, some would probably argue that there are already too many Hugos. It would be folly, they might say, to create yet another category, much less give away *multiple* website awards. While I agree in principle with the need for conservation of Hugos, my solution would be to cut some of the soon-to-be-obsolete print categories in order to make room for digital replacements. What's that? I can hear howls of pain already! But recall **Cory Doctorow's** <<http://www.craphound.com>>

Two Certainities, which we considered in this space several installments ago. They are 1. *More people are reading more words off more screens every day.* 2. *Fewer people are reading fewer words off fewer pages every day.* I'm sure you can do the math.

From the perspective of, say, ten years hence and viewed with the insight of the Two Certainities, current Hugo categories such as Semiprozine and Fanzine may seem as quaint as the Number One Fan Personality category of 1953. Indeed, if we look at the recent history of the Fanzine category, we can see the beginning of the shift from dead trees to digits. For although Noreascon chose not to give an official website Hugo last year, it nevertheless awarded a Hugo to a website. The excellent **Emerald City** <<http://www.emcit.com/index.shtml>> copped the silver rocket for Best Fanzine.

pretend

Let's be clear here. I applaud Interaction's decision to give that second "special" Hugo to a website. But I see it as a stopgap measure that does not begin to acknowledge the riches to be found on the web. The five sites that will make it onto the ballot will inevitably have as much in common as apples and oranges—no, make that apples and tigers and toenails and DVDs and molybdenum. If I were elected Supreme Being, I would decree that there be no less than *five* digital Hugos: Best Fiction Site, Best Non-Fiction Site, Best E-zine, Best Opinion Site, and Best Blog. Alas, I hold undisputed sway over this column only. But since Sheila lets me

do pretty much as I please here, let me present to you (in alphabetical order) my hypothetical nominees for the Digital Hugos of 2004.

Best Fiction Site: Electric Story <<http://www.electricstory.com>>, **Fictionwise** <<http://www.fictionwise.com>>, **Infinity Plus** <<http://www.infinityplus.co.uk>>, **SciFiction** <<http://www.scifi.com/scifiction>>, **Strange Horizons** <<http://www.strangehorizons.com>>. **Comments: Electric Story, Fictionwise, and Infinity Plus** are all reprint sites, but offer treasures that are unique in all the web. The economics of paper publishing make it difficult to keep short stories in print. I look to these excellent sites to help preserve the history of the genre. **SciFiction** is the highest paying fiction market, and as such attracts many of the best writers working today. **Strange Horizons** is a web publishing phenomenon. Seemingly under-capitalized, it has flourished thanks to the selfless dedication of its staff. Many of tomorrow's stars appear on this site regularly. I might easily have listed **Strange Horizons** in the best E-Zine category, but it feels right here.

Best Non-Fiction Site: Locus Online <<http://www.locusmag.com>>, **SF Crowsnest** <<http://www.sfcrowsnest.com>>, **SF Revu** <<http://www.sfrevu.com>>, **SF Site** <<http://www.sfsite.com/home.htm>>, **SF Weekly** <<http://www.scifi.com/sfw>>. **Comments:** Okay, so my definition of these categories is fluid. While all five nominees here report genre news, some are updated daily, some monthly. Moreover, they all offer review and opinion. So why aren't they in my Opinion category? Because I say so, that's why! Besides, they seem

to be roughly of a type. If you absolutely positively have to stay up-to-date on breaking news in science fiction, you'd be hard-pressed to find a better site than **Locus Online**. However, **SF Crowsnest**, which bills itself as Europe's most read science fiction site, catches many stories that **Locus Online** misses. While **SF Site** and **SF Weekly** do a fine job of covering the news, I read them mostly for their reviews and columns. **SF Revu** doesn't get quite as much respect as the other nominees in this category, which is a shame, because it is every bit as polished.

Best E-Zine: Fantastic Metropolis <<http://www.fantasticmetropolis.com>>, **Ideomancer** <<http://www.ideomancer.com>>, **Mars Dust** <<http://www.marsdust.com>>, **RevolutionSF** <<http://revolutionsf.com>> **The Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America** <<http://www.sfw.org>>. **Comments:** Before we begin to discuss this category, we have to deal with the problem of **SciFi.com** <<http://scifi.com>>. If this 272.16 kilogram gorilla of a site, sponsored by television's SciFi Channel, isn't an E-Zine, then what is? The problem is that if I consider **Sci-Fi.com** as a single entity, then I have to pull two of its outstanding subsidiary sites, **SciFiction** and **SF Weekly**, from their respective categories. And since they are two of my very favorite sites on all the web, I can't quite bring myself to do it.

My idea of E-Zines is that they're sites that combine fiction, non-fiction, reviews, criticism . . . in short, a little bit of everything. Of my five nominees, **Mars Dust** and **RevolutionSF** manage this with a dollop of attitude and a predilection

for popular culture; they range the farthest afield from material traditionally considered to be in the genre. **Fantastic Metropolis** is one of our most eloquent advocates for a literary sensibility of the fantastic. I could just as easily have put **Ideomancer** in the fiction category with **Strange Horizons**, but it's here in part because it comes out in quarterly issues. The cool thing about **Ideomancer** is that it's published in Adobe's pdf format, which downloads nicely onto my Pocket PC. Webmasters, this is a feature well worth considering! Sure, it's a stretch to include the **SFWA** site here, but I had to put it somewhere, because it's simply one of the most useful SF sites around. The essays are universally instructive, the fiction portal is comprehensive, and the news feature perks along nicely.

Best Opinion Site: **Ansible** <<http://www.dcs.gla.ac.uk/SF-Archives/Ansible>>, **Best SF** <<http://www.bestsf.net>>, **Emerald City** <<http://www.emcit.com/index.shtml>>, **Internet Review of Science Fiction** <<http://www.irosf.com>>, **Tangent Online** <<http://www.tangentonline.com>>. *Comments:* As I write this, both **Tangent Online** and **Internet Review of Science Fiction** are—temporarily, I hope—without editors. But even if the unthinkable happens and they fold, both deserve recognition for the splendid critical work they published in 2004. If there were an award for the Best Site You've Probably Never Heard Of, I'd give it to **Best SF**. And of course past

Hugo winners **Ansible** and **Emerald City** are two of the finest fanzines on the web.

Best Blog: **Boing Boing** <<http://boingboing.net>>, **The Mumpsimus** <<http://mumpsimus.blogspot.com/c>>, **Futurismic** <<http://futurismic.com>>, **SFSignal** <<http://www.sfsignal.com>>, **Charlie's Diary** <<http://www.antipope.org/charlie/blosxom.cgi>>. *Comments:* Wait a minute! Blogs? Jim wants to give Hugos to blogs? Yes, I do. It says here that blogs are destined to move to the center of science fiction fandom. Soon, like maybe the day after tomorrow. Next Sunday at the latest. My nominees include three marvelous link-based blogs, **Boing Boing**, **Futurismic**, and **SF Signal**, and two of the most thoughtful personal blogs on the web, **The Mumpsimus** and **Charlie's Diary**.

exit

Time for the obligatory moment of disclosure: I have stories on **Fictionwise**, **Infinity Plus**, **SciFiction**, and **Fantastic Metropolis**, essays on the **SFWA** site and interviews up on **Locus Online** and **SF Weekly**. But hey, I love *all* of these sites and know and respect many of the good people who make them possible. This should hardly come as a surprise. This is, after all, a friendly genre and I *am* your internet columnist!

So there you have it. Let's see about getting some of these folks the Hugos they deserve, shall we? ○

THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS

Walter Jon Williams

SCIENCE FICTION VILLAGE

I don't know how many science fiction conventions I've attended over the years. Say that I've averaged four a year since I first started attending cons, and that would add up to something like 130. Which is not a great many by the standards of some fans or even writers, but it seems a great many to me.

My first science fiction convention was around 1972, and was held in my home town of Albuquerque, New Mexico. I was approximately eighteen years of age, and had nothing else to do that weekend, so I went. The science fiction community, while friendly, did not precisely welcome me with open arms, but then eighteen-year-olds are *used* to not being precisely welcomed anywhere with open arms. So that was all right, and I had a sufficiently good time so that I went the next year, and the year after that, and so on, and now here I am with 130 conventions under my belt.

In memory all the science fiction conventions of my life tend to become compressed into one big, endless convention, a Convention that transcends time and space like some strange superliner out of J.G. Ballard, where anyone you've ever met at any convention anywhere can be found, sooner or later, in the bar. You only know where you are when you look outside, and find that it's Albuquerque, or Los Angeles, or Glasgow, or Gdansk. But the convention itself is a remarkably stable configuration, retaining its same shape and function and ritual, like British ex-

patriates in the Raffles Club in Singapore who raise a pink gin to the Queen every day at four o'clock, commemorating an empire on which the sun has long since set.

But this long, timeless convention exists of course only in memory, and memories are notoriously unreliable . . . and my personal memory is more highly suspect than most. In reality the science fiction community has changed a great deal since my first convention. For those of you who weren't attending conventions in 1972, or for those of you with memories like mine, let me give you an idea of what my first convention was like.

For one thing, I could be reasonably certain that when I walked into a room full of strangers, everyone I met would have about 150 books in common. We'd all have read the core texts of Verne and Wells, and *When Worlds Collide*, and Asimov's *I, Robot*, Olaf Stapledon's *Star Maker*, Jack Williamson's *The Humanoids*, L. Sprague de Camp's *Lest Darkness Fall*, Fritz Leiber's Lankhmar stories, Bester's *Demolished Man*, Van Vogt's *Slan*, *The Space Merchants* by Frederik Pohl, Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*, *Day of the Triffids*, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End*, Dickson's *Tactics of Mistake*, Le Guin's *Left Hand of Darkness*, Frank Herbert's *Dune*, Zelazny's *Lord of Light*, *Flowers for Algernon*, Brian Aldiss's *Hothouse* series, John Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar*, Judith Merrill's collection *England Swings*

SF, Sturgeon's *Venus Plus X*, Samuel R. Delany's *The Einstein Intersection*, *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* by Heinlein, *Stranger in a Strange Land* by Heinlein, *Glory Road* by Heinlein, *The Star Beast* by Heinlein . . . well, in fact, *everything* by Heinlein.

Looking back, it seems clear that this is a darn good list. You can't go very far wrong with most of these books. And the likelihood that everyone I met at my first SF convention shared all these reading experiences in common made it very easy to talk to any strangers I chanced to meet. And furthermore, the people I met were *the sort of people* who would read the sort of thing that science fiction is, so that made it even easier to find common ground.

I'd like to make two points about this otherwise admirable list.

First, there was no non-print media. In 1972 there was no science fiction on television. None. Zero. If you were lucky you might catch some *Twilight Zone* reruns late at night, but that was about it. *Trek* had been canceled years earlier, and I don't think it was yet being rerun on any kind of regular basis.

There were no VCRs. If you wanted to watch the *Twilight Zone* reruns, you had to be in front of the television at the hour at which the show was broadcast, or you'd miss it. Because there was no way the average viewer had of preserving *Trek* when it was first run, *Trek* lived on only in memory.

In 1972, there was no Hugo award for best film. There were simply no SF movies that anyone considered worthy of a Hugo award. Picture that!

The second point I'd like to make about the list is that, for all its quality, it's provincial. Practically every-

thing on it originated in North America or England. While there were some translations of French or Russian or Polish SF available, there were no definitive texts, and few reliable translations. Stanislaw Lem, for example, was translated from a French text, which was a translation from German, which was a translation from Polish. Though some of the sense came across to the reader, none of the elements that make Lem special were available to the American reader of 1972.

The list was also provincial in that practically all the authors were male. Although in 1972 authors like Joanna Russ, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Kate Wilhelm were in the process of making a profound change in the field, probably the only text by a woman that everyone at my first SF convention would have read would have been the Hugo-Award-winning *Left Hand of Darkness*.

And another thing that makes this list provincial is that, to the average American reader of 1972—even to the average well-read reader—practically all these names were the names of strangers. A reader from outside the SF world would have heard of Jules Verne and H.G. Wells, and he may have known of Clarke from his connection with the film *2001*, but knowledge of any of the other names would have been a result of sheer chance.

What separated the world of science fiction from the outside world was Science Fiction Culture.

Science fiction at the time was something like a small village in an isolated mountain valley. It was a comfortable and secure place, because everyone had so much in common, and most people in the village knew each other. The villagers were in general friendly toward outsiders,

but often found that they and the outsiders had little in common, because their values were so different.

The village was created, originally in the US, by a group of hardy pioneers who marched into the wilderness to build a community able to realize its own visionary destiny and live free from the shackles of the past.

This is a fairly traditional thing to do in America: as examples we have the Oneida Colony, in the early nineteenth century, established so that its inhabitants could practice an extraordinarily rigorous brand of sexual freedom; there were the Mormons, who walked across hundreds of miles of desert to build their Temple on the Great Salt Lake; and there is Anaheim, in California, originally a Utopian community established by a group of German religious dissidents, now the home of Mickey Mouse. There were probably hundreds of these little communities. America has always had a high degree of toleration for social experiment, at least on a modest scale.

How our pioneers actually built Science Fiction Village was a little unusual, however—it was an early example of a virtual community, its vision held together not by roads or infrastructure but by what passed in those days for mass media. The pioneers of the Science Fiction Village went to an extraordinary amount of effort to hold their community together. They composed lengthy essays, reviews, minutiae, visionary screeds, political, artistic, and literary manifestos—a really colossal amount of wordage, no small percentage of which was taken up by enormous, earth-shaking feuds between one fan or group of fans and another. All these ephemera were inscribed on paper by machines like

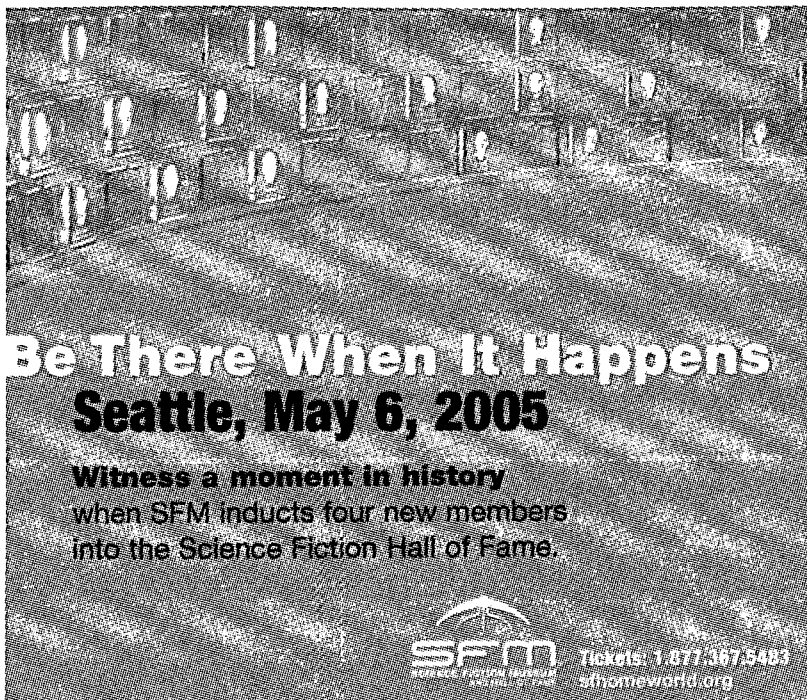
the mimeograph or hectograph, machines that required infinite labor on the part of the user before an acceptable copy could be produced. So laborious was the whole process that for the first two decades of the Science Fiction Village, the population was little more than five hundred souls.

Given all the work it took to be a fan in those days, it's not surprising that efforts were made to make the virtual village a real one, if for no other reason than to save postage and many hours bent over the hectograph. Clubs were formed, communes organized, and eventually conventions were held. Bob Tucker—with what degree of seriousness I will not venture to guess—told everyone to bring him bricks, so that fans could construct a hotel to be a permanent home for the Worldcon. (I hope he at least got a barbecue grille out of it.)

Building things was not out of line for a lot of the early fans, who were attracted to SF by their love of gadgetry in general. Many were the sort of people who built amateur radios, model airplanes or rockets, or who otherwise had a hands-on approach to technology.

While most of the rest of the world was distracted by the Great Depression and the Second World War, the pioneers who founded Science Fiction Village continued to labor with great dedication and amazing persistence at constructing their virtual community, and you have to wonder what it was that drove them.

Hugo Gernsback, who edited the first magazine devoted solely to SF, was perhaps the first to insist that SF was a separate literature, but works of enduring quality in a Gernsback publication were hard to find. For a field to descend in a genera-



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tion from a founder like H.G. Wells to contributors like Philip Francis Nowlan has to be considered an alarming beginning.

It's a lucky thing that the readers were the sort of people who were used to building things, because the promise of science fiction was difficult to find, and had in large part to be constructed by the reader, not without a great deal of effort. It's not, I suspect, that the fans were incapable of telling the difference between H.G. Wells and E.E. Smith, it's that they saw the difference *and decided it didn't matter*. That's what makes them interesting. What they responded to in SF was a kind of half-demented visionary enthusiasm that skated perilously close to megalomania. Barely literate writers, earning half a cent a word on a good day, were challenging the stars! Writing stories about planets colliding with earth, bathtubs that raced

to the stars, klystron tubes the size of the moon! This stuff was stirring! It was epic! It had *scope*! And, in people like Frank R. Paul and Elliott Dold, SF found illustrators capable of rising to the colossal scale of its fantasies.

These pioneering SF fans tended to be from working-class or rural backgrounds, raised without the opportunities for higher education that came after the Second World War. They were used to doing things for themselves. They were highly intelligent, read widely but without system, had a high regard for facts or for what purported to be facts—they were in fact classic autodidacts. They had no received authority to tell them what was good and what was bad. They decided to define their own standards of *good*, unhampered by authoritative opinion, of which they were probably unaware and which in any case they would have

considered of no more weight than their own.

There was no one even to tell them how unusual this was. The classic mystery, which evolved a generation or so earlier, was created as a form entirely by the writers—it was the *writers* who decided that they must play fair with the audience, must not solve mysteries via *deus ex machina* or without offering all the clues to the readers—it was the writers themselves who moved the form forward. Literary fiction, by contrast, has an entire paid critic-class to inform both the writers and the public what is worthy of admiration. What happened with SF was that the writers and readers together collaborated on creating the form. Fans became writers. Many writers were fans. The letter columns of the magazines brimmed with strident opinions regarding the stories, and more opinions were unleashed in the fanzines.

In this wonderfully self-created way, Science Fiction Village was assembled. Along with the fiction, the culture grew more sophisticated along the way, but it retained a proudly self-made quality, standards that it considered unique to itself, and a specialized vocabulary to describe both the texts, the contents of the texts, and the special view of life that was considered particularly scientificfictional. Fandom may not necessarily be a way of life, but it's a definitely a point of view.

And there's another thing unique to the science fiction point of view. SF fans consider themselves outsiders.

In the US, there's a large fraternal organization called the Ancient Order of the Mystic Shrine—which was founded, by the way, by Civil War general Lew Wallace, author of *Ben-*

Hur. The Shriners are composed entirely of men who are thirty-second-degree Freemasons, and who dress up as Arabs, march in parades wearing full costume, and are known for getting spectacularly and publicly drunk, often in large crowds.

The Shriners, it should be noted, consider themselves *normal*—a part of mainstream American life. American science fiction fans, who by and large are much less eccentric than the Shriners, for some reason consider themselves outside the American norm. It's an important part of their self-image, and it has considerable impact on the way the inhabitants of Science Fiction Village interact with those outside their community.

So this was the community I entered in 1972: intelligent, self-reliant, confident in its own judgments and traditions. SF had gained increasing acceptance in the outside world, though SF Village was largely indifferent to this. The population of Science Fiction Village consisted of thousands of people by now, most of them well educated, and their views on SF and the world ranged through a wide spectrum, though they were all agreed that technology drove the engine of social change.

There were a few common blind spots, however. It's a truism that of all the thousands of stories of the first Moon landing, none considered that it would be covered live on television. Like most truisms, this truism isn't precisely true—there was at least one story that featured live television, but still this omission is pretty odd, and points to SF's strange, insistent reliance on old media, specifically the written word. Perhaps it was a result of all those hours spent over a mimeograph machine, but no one in SF Village seemed to

appreciate the oncoming power of global communications. Of all the stories of the future, I can think of none that pointed out that the future would be covered live, to the whole planet, on five hundred channels of TV. Strange, because it was primitive visual mass media that created Science Fiction's virtual village, and modern mass media that would eventually threaten to overwhelm it. Stranger still, because such orgiastic worldwide media fests as the death of Princess Diana or the O.J. Simpson trial would have been natural material for the sharp SF satirists of the 1950s, people like Fred Pohl and Cyril Kornbluth.

It was the advance of technology itself that provided the greatest threat to Science Fiction Village. Briefly, technology and history both evolved in wildly different ways from the ways SF had assumed. If few SF stories assumed the presence of television on the Moon, none at all predicted that we would make several successful voyages to the Moon, then stop going. SF assumed giant main-frame computers, in industrial or government settings, that controlled entire cities, not millions of diverse, networked computers on the desks of ordinary people. Science fiction

assumed coldly calculating world tyrannies, not social democracies whose population was force-fed millions of hours of media programming intended to turn them into avid consumers. SF envisioned a world civilization and culture strikingly like that of contemporary North America, or a Cold War that stretched into the indefinite future. None of these things happened, or are likely to happen.

But they are still the stuff of science fiction. Technology has out-evolved the literature that was supposed to provide its readers with a means of grappling with technology.

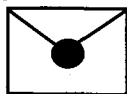
SF's chief response to this dilemma has been to ignore it, and to go on writing the sort of stories that remain traditional. I regularly read books—*new* books—in which the futuristic technology described is already obsolete in terms of what we can do now or know we'll be able to do in the near future. (By the way, I do not exempt myself from this critique: I remember sending a completed manuscript to the publisher even while I realized to my sorrow that my descriptions of the technology therein, and the setting in which the action took place, was soooooo sadly twentieth century.)

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There is a large amount of nostalgia that has begun to permeate Science Fiction Culture. Both readers and writers are longing for the futures they knew when young. In order to be able to retell the old kinds of stories, we've seen writers use all manner of gimmicks. Arbitrary galactic holocausts that somehow bring about the rise of feudalism—traditional galactic emperors, and their courts of stellar dukes and counts, are so much more sexy, and wicked, than our own evil emperor Bill Gates. There's a boom in alternate-history fiction, in which the past can be rearranged in order to provide a more comfortable present. And some writers simply write stories that are *about old stories*, like "Think Like a Dinosaur" by James Patrick Kelly, which is a Hugo-winning riff on "The Cold Equations," or Allen Steele's "The Death of Captain Future," which is a deeply nasty tale of what happens to you if you grow up reading too much Edmond Hamilton. All this recursiveness is pretty odd for a form of literature that prides itself on celebrating the new.

But that's all minor compared to the principal threat to Science Fiction Village, which comes from the mass media with which traditional SF has the least sympathy or understanding—movies and television. Visual media eats SF—it eats SF by the truckload—and what it regurgitates is not always pretty.

And speaking of Edmond Hamilton, we find him regurgitated pretty well in *Star Wars*, which succeeds in bringing to the screen forms of SF that have been pretty well dead for fifty years.

It's the success of *Star Trek*, however, that is particularly menacing. Understand that it's very difficult to

create a weekly television series—you have to write and shoot and edit very very fast, and you devour anything that will help you do it. That's okay, though—ideas are free, you can't copyright them.

But *Trek* is being broadcast, somewhere, every single hour of every day. And the last *Star Wars* movie had more viewers on its opening weekend than have ever read a science fiction novel. All of which means that many more people are getting their first exposure to science fiction via TV and film than through books.

This is a problem for written SF, simply because every time an episode of *Trek* is broadcast, it's an enormous hour-long advertisement for *Trek* fiction, which like other media fiction is crowding real SF off the shelves. But that's not the subject of my essay—complaints about visual-media fiction would sound too much like whining. I want to talk about what's happening to Science Fiction Culture.

There are two reasons why the success of television and movie SF is a problem for Science Fiction Culture. Firstly, as Marshall McLuhan observed, television flattens the affect of everything it broadcasts: everything ends up having the same degree of urgency. *Trek* is delivered with the same impact as the death of Princess Diana, or the genocides in Sudan, or the commercials for laxatives and denture adhesives that bring you the news program about the killings in Sudan. (By the way, this uniformity of affect is even greater on the World Wide Web: which presents with equal solemnity bulletins from the White House, ads for new science fiction novels, disquisitions on Pyramid Power, my own personal web page <www.walterjonwilliams.net>, and lengthy rants from some person who believes that

the government has implanted a microchip in his left buttock that enabled their black helicopters to follow him wherever he goes, until of course he foiled them by adopting tinfoil underwear.)

In addition to this flattening of affect, electronic media brings science fiction to its audience free of Science Fiction Culture, the history and view of science fiction laboriously hammered out over the last sixty or seventy years, created originally by dedicated fanatics wading up to their knees in gelatinous hectograph fluids. Science Fiction Culture places the work in its context, relates it to other work, to traditional themes in science fiction, to the contributions of individual editors and magazines. All this is necessarily absent from visual SF, which—also necessarily—looks on SF as a grab-bag full of ideas useful to put Scott Bakula in jeopardy again this week.

The result is that visual media SF is—as far as Science Fiction Culture is concerned—virtually content-free. Curiously enough, this disassociation of science fiction from its roots, along with media's flattening of affect, has spawned a distinct new branch of literature, one in which SF ideas are treated—out of their origi-

nal context—as pop culture elements more or less equivalent to other pop culture elements likewise gathered from media. Bruce Sterling has labeled this literature “slipstream.” A true inhabitant of Science Fiction Village would disdain a work that featured both SF elements and UFOs, because through the kind of consensus by which Science Fiction Culture was hammered out, UFOs are deemed too irrational for real SF (unlike time travel and faster-than-light ships, apparently). But a Slipstream novelist like David Foster Wallace or Ted Mooney, both unaware of and uninterested in the dictates of SF Culture, would think nothing of throwing in SF tropes alongside UFOs, Yetis, angelic visitations from Princess Diana, along with laxative ads, denture adhesives, and other emanations from the world of the popular tabloids. All this matter comes through the same distribution channel, namely television, and is all equally prey to the cunning postmodern novelist.

So where does all this leave Science Fiction Village? Oddly enough, just about where I first encountered it almost thirty years ago. The inhabitants of Science Fiction Village are very good at ignoring things that don't interest them. But still, Sci-

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ence Fiction Village now has some large, new neighbors.

Imagine, if you will, the original pious immigrant inhabitants of Anaheim, now looking over their shoulder at the huge edifice of Disneyland looming over their orange groves. So the inhabitants of Science Fiction Village must regard Visual Media City, the glittering district of skyscrapers and lights and fame that looms over their homes, a place much wealthier and better known than Science Fiction Village. Yet—strangely—the inhabitants of Visual Media City regularly swarm into Science Fiction Village in order to plunder the village of its contents, sometimes paying extremely well, usually paying nothing at all.

Around Science Fiction Village orbit other satellites. There's Creative Anachronist Castle, Live-Action-Role-Playing-Land, Game City, The Multi-User Dungeon, and even a quaint mock-English village where people meet to engage in the types of dances enjoyed by the English gentry two hundred years ago. (What any of this has to do with science fiction is anyone's guess, but everyone's having a good time, so why the hell not?)

Science Fiction Village, though larger and more diverse, still maintains the same standards and prejudices I recall from 1972. Unfortunately, we no longer all have the same one hundred fifty books in common. SF is a huge field by now, and even diligent readers can't keep up with all of it—plus, of course, most of the classics of the field are very sadly out of print and unavailable. But still, everyone remains the sort of person who would read the sort of thing that science fiction is, so I still feel at home when I attend

conventions. Plus, I sometimes encounter people who have actually read my books, and that's a rare and cherished treat.

The concords and standards so laboriously hammered out by generations of fans and writers are still in place. Science Fiction Culture is still what it was in the beginning, the product of a small group of enthusiasts who do it for the love of the thing. (If an author gave a damn for money, he or she would be over in Visual Media City, dancing megabuck tunes with the Rat.) The village is still provincial, it's still proud of its pioneer heritage, and it's still ignored or misunderstood by the rest of the world.

But damned if I care.

Science Fiction Culture is still *my* culture, and I'm sticking with it. ○

The author's far-future series Dread Empire's Fall, which began in this magazine with the story "Margaux" (May 2002), and continued with "Solidarity" (April/May 2005), will conclude in the novel Conventions of War, due in November from Harper-Collins. In his Thought Experiment, Walter switched from the history of the far future to the history of a subculture.

THE PHYSICIST'S WARNING

(with apologies to Jenny Joseph)

When I am old, I shall wear ultra-violet
and a red Doppler shift that doesn't go, and doesn't suit me.
And I shall spend my pension on large crystal lenses,
star flung champagne and small velvet purses
that remind me of black holes. I'll spend everything on shuttle tickets
then say we have no money for nuclear warheads.

I shall visit the Hubble Telescope if I am tired
and call press conferences with stories of alien encounters.
I shall make up for the studiousness of my youth
by writing science fictional bodice rippers and submitting
them as papers to academic conferences.
I shall go to the observatory in silk kimono and fuzzy slippers
and borrow a centrifuge to mix chocolate chip cookies.

I shall polish my hot flashes until they take on a brilliance
of their own. Sometimes I'll forget to eat; other times
I shall eat Blue Moon Ice Cream for a week until my elimination
becomes blue shifted, thereby disproving universal expansion.
I shall steal paper clips from others' file cabinets,
hoard laser pens, yellow pads, and colored stars in tiny boxes.
Sometimes I'll wear stars in my hair.

For now I shall wear sensible shoes that cushion my arches,
pay all my taxes, and foreswear swearing in faculty meetings.
I shall set a good example for graduate students
by inviting alumni to dinner and reading long journal articles;
but maybe I ought to practice a bit now
so my colleagues are not so shocked and surprised
when ensconced in a fabric of ultra-violet, I rise
beyond realms of visible light and barriers of audible sound.

—Sandra Lindow

THE CHILDREN OF TIME

Stephen Baxter

Stephen Baxter tells us his “big news is that we moved house last year, to a National Park in Northumberland, near the Scottish border.” Stephen’s next novel, *Transcendent* (Del Rey, December 2005), is his third in the *Destiny’s Children* series, and *Sunstorm*, a follow-up to *Time’s Eye* written with Sir Arthur C. Clarke, will be out from Del Rey early next year.

I

Jaal had always been fascinated by the ice on the horizon. Even now, beyond the smoke of the evening hearth, he could see that line of pure bone white, sharper than a stone blade’s cut, drawn across the edge of the world.

It was the end of the day, and a huge sunset was staining the sky. Alone, restless, he walked a few paces away from the rich smoky pall, away from the smell of broiling raccoon meat and bubbling goat fat, the languid talk of the adults, the eager play of the children.

The ice was always there on the northern horizon, always out of reach no matter how hard you walked across the scrubby grassland. He knew why. The ice cap was retreating; dumping its pure whiteness into the meltwater streams, exposing land crushed and gouged and strewn with vast boulders. So while you walked toward it, the ice was marching away from you.

And now the gathering sunset was turning the distant ice pink. The clean geometric simplicity of the landscape drew his soul; he stared, entranced.

Jaal was eleven years old, a compact bundle of muscle. He was dressed in layers of clothing, sinew-sewn from scraped goat skin and topped by a heavy coat of rabbit fur. On his head was a hat made by his father from

the skin of a whole raccoon, and on his feet he wore the skin of pigeons, turned inside-out and the feathers coated with grease. Around his neck was a string of pierced cat teeth.

Jaal looked back at his family. There were a dozen of them, parents and children, aunts and uncles, nephews and nieces, and one grandmother, worn down, aged forty-two. Except for the very smallest children, everybody moved slowly, obviously weary. They had walked a long way today.

He knew he should go back to the fire and help out, do his duty, find firewood or skin a rat. But every day was like this. Jaal had ancient, unpleasant memories from when he was very small, of huts burning, people screaming and fleeing. Jaal and his family had been walking north ever since, looking for a new home. They hadn't found it yet.

Jaal spotted Sura, good-humoredly struggling to get a filthy skin coat off the squirming body of her little sister. Sura, Jaal's second cousin, was two years older than him. She had a limpid, liquid ease of movement in everything she did.

She saw Jaal looking at her and arched an eyebrow. He blushed, hot, and turned away to the north. The ice was a much less complicated companion than Sura.

He saw something new.

As the angle of the sun continued to change, the light picked out something on the ground. It was a straight line, glowing red in the light of the sun, like an echo of the vast edge of the ice itself. But this line was close, only a short walk from here, cutting through hummocks and scattered boulders. He had to investigate.

With a guilty glance back at his family, he ran away, off to the north, his pigeon-skin boots carrying him silently over the hard ground. The straight-edge feature was further away than it looked, and as he became frustrated he ran faster. But then he came on it. He stumbled to a halt, panting.

It was a ridge as high as his knees—a ridge of stone, but nothing like the ice-carved boulders and shattered gravel that littered the rest of the landscape. Though its top was worn and broken, its sides were *flat*, smoother than any stone he had touched before, and the sunlight filled its creamy surface with color.

Gingerly he climbed on the wall to see better. The ridge of stone ran off to left and right, to east and west—and then it turned sharp corners, to run north, before turning back on itself again. There was a pattern here, he saw. This stone ridge traced a straight-edged frame on the ground.

And there were more ridges; the shadows cast by the low sun picked out the stone tracings clearly. The land to the north of here was covered by a tremendous rectangular scribble that went on as far as he could see. All this was made by people. He knew this immediately, without question.

In fact this had been a suburb of Chicago. Most of the city had been scraped clean by the advancing ice, but the foundations of this suburb, fortuitously, had been flooded and frozen in before the glaciers came. These ruins were already a hundred thousand years old.

"Jaal. Jaal! . . ." His mother's voice carried to him like the cry of a bird.

He couldn't bear to leave what he had found. He stood on the eroded wall and let his mother come to him.

She was weary, grimy, stressed. "Why must you do this? Don't you *know* the cats hunt in twilight?"

He flinched from the disappointment in her eyes, but he couldn't contain his excitement. "Look what I found, mother!"

She stared around. Her face showed incomprehension, disinterest. "What is it?"

His imagination leapt, fueled by wonder, and he tried to make her see what he saw. "Maybe once these rock walls were tall, tall as the ice itself. Maybe people lived here in great heaps, and the smoke of their fires rose up to the sky. Mother, will we come to live here again?"

"Perhaps one day," his mother said at random, to hush him.

The people never would return. By the time the returning ice had shattered their monocultural, over-extended technological civilization, people had exhausted the Earth of its accessible deposits of iron ore and coal and oil and other resources. People would survive: smart, adaptable, they didn't need cities for that. But with nothing but their most ancient technologies of stone and fire, they could never again conjure up the towers of Chicago. Soon even Jaal, distracted by the fiery eyes of Sura, would forget this place existed.

But for now he longed to explore. "Let me go on. Just a little further!"

"No," his mother said gently. "The adventure's over. It's time to go. Come now." And she put her arm around his shoulders, and led him home.

II

Urlu crawled toward the river. The baked ground was hard under her knees and hands, and stumps of burned-out trees and shrubs scraped her flesh. There was no green here, nothing grew, and nothing moved save a few flecks of ash disturbed by the low breeze.

She was naked, sweating, her skin streaked by charcoal. Her hair was a mat, heavy with dust and grease. In one hand she carried a sharpened stone. She was eleven years old.

She wore a string of pierced teeth around her neck. The necklace was a gift from her grandfather, Pala, who said the teeth were from an animal called a rabbit. Urlu had never seen a rabbit. The last of them had died in the Burning, before she was born, along with the rats and the raccoons, all the small mammals that had long ago survived the ice with mankind. So there would be no more rabbit teeth. The necklace was precious.

The light brightened. Suddenly there was a shadow beneath her, her own form cast upon the darkened ground. She threw herself flat in the dirt. She wasn't used to shadows. Cautiously she glanced over her shoulder, up at the sky.

All her life a thick lid of ash-laden cloud had masked the sky. But for the last few days it had been breaking up, and today the cloud had disintegrated further. And now, through high drifting cloud, she saw a disc, pale and gaunt.

It was the sun. She had been told its name, but had never quite be-

lieved in it. Now it was revealed, and Urlu helplessly stared up at its geometric purity.

She heard a soft voice call warningly. "Urlu!" It was her mother.

It was no good to be daydreaming about the sky. She had a duty to fulfill, down here in the dirt. She turned and crawled on.

She reached the bank. The river, thick with blackened dirt and heavy with debris, rolled sluggishly. It was so wide that in the dim light of noon she could barely see the far side. In fact this was the Seine, and the charred ground covered traces of what had once been Paris. It made no difference where she was. The whole Earth was like this, all the same.

To Urlu's right, downstream, she saw hunters, pink faces smeared with dirt peering from the ruined vegetation. The weight of their expectation pressed heavily on her.

She took her bit of chipped stone, and pressed its sharpest edge against the skin of her palm. It had to be her. The people believed that the creatures of the water were attracted by the blood of a virgin. She was afraid of the pain to come, but she had no choice; if she didn't go through with the cut one of the men would come and do it for her, and that would hurt far more.

But she heard a wail, a cry of loss and sorrow, rising like smoke into the dismal air. It was coming from the camp. The faces along the bank turned, distracted. Then, one by one, the hunters slid back into the ruined undergrowth.

Urlu, hugely relieved, turned away from the debris-choked river, her stone tucked safely in her hand.

The camp was just a clearing in the scorched ground-cover, with a charcoal fire burning listlessly in the hearth. Beside the fire an old man lay on a rough pallet of earth and scorched brush, gaunt, as naked and filthy as the rest. His eyes were wide, rheumy, and he stared at the sky. Pala, forty-five years old, was Urlu's grandfather. He was dying, eaten from within by something inside his belly.

He was tended by a woman who knelt in the dirt beside him. She was his oldest daughter, Urlu's aunt. The grime on her face was streaked by tears. "He's frightened," said the aunt. "It's finishing him off."

Urlu's mother asked, "Frightened of what?"

The aunt pointed into the sky.

The old man had reason to be frightened of strange lights in the sky. He had been just four years old when a greater light had come to Earth.

After Jaal's time, the ice had returned a dozen times more before retreating for good. After that, people rapidly cleared the land of the legacy of the ice: descendants of cats and rodents and birds, grown large and confident in the temporary absence of humanity. Then people hunted and farmed, built up elaborate networks of trade and culture, and developed exquisite technologies of wood and stone and bone. There was much evolutionary churning in the depths of the sea, out of reach of mankind. But people were barely touched by time, for there was no need for them to change.

This equable afternoon endured for thirty million years. The infant Pala's parents had sung him songs unimaginably old.

But then had come the comet's rude incursion. Nearly a hundred mil-

lion years after the impactor that had terminated the summer of the dinosaurs, Earth had been due another mighty collision.

Pala and his parents, fortuitously close to a cave-ridden mountain, had endured the fires, the rain of molten rock, the long dust-shrouded winter. People survived, as they had lived through lesser cataclysms since the ice. And with their ingenuity and adaptability and generalist ability to eat almost anything, they had already begun to spread once more over the ruined lands.

Once it had been thought that human survival would depend on planting colonies on other worlds, for Earth would always be prone to such disasters. But people had never ventured far from Earth: there was nothing out there; the stars had always remained resolutely silent. And though since the ice their numbers had never been more than a few million, people were too numerous and too widespread to be eliminated even by a comet's deadly kiss. It was easy to kill a lot of people. It was very hard to kill them all.

As it happened old Pala was the last human alive to remember the world before the Burning. With him died memories thirty million years deep. In the morning they staked out his body on a patch of high ground.

The hunting party returned to the river, to finish the job they had started. This time there was no last-minute reprieve for Urlu. She slit open her palm, and let her blood run into the murky river water. Its crimson was the brightest color in the whole of this grey-black world.

Urlu's virginal state made no difference to the silent creature who slid through the water, but she was drawn by the scent of blood. Another of the planet's great survivors, she had ridden out the Burning buried in deep mud, and fed without distaste on the scorched remains washed into her river. Now she swam up toward the murky light.

All her life Urlu had eaten nothing but snakes, cockroaches, scorpions, spiders, maggots, termites. That night she feasted on crocodile meat.

By the morning she was no longer a virgin. She didn't enjoy it much, but at least it was her choice. And at least she wouldn't have to go through any more blood-letting.

III

The catamaran glided toward the beach, driven by the gentle current of the shallow sea and the muscles of its crew. When it ran aground the people splashed into water that came up to their knees, and began to unload weapons and food. The sun hung bright and hot in a cloudless blue dome of a sky, and the people, small and lithe, were surrounded by shining clouds of droplets as they worked. Some of them had their favorite snakes wrapped around their necks.

Cale, sitting on the catamaran, clung to its seaweed trunks. Looking out to sea, he could spot the fine dark line that was the floating community where he had been born. This was an age of warmth, of high seas that had flooded the edges of the continents, and most people on Earth

made their living from the rich produce of coral reefs and other sun-drenched shallow-water ecosystems. Cale longed to go back to the rafts, but soon he must walk on dry land, for the first time in his life. He was eleven years old.

Cale's mother, Lia, splashed through the water to him. Her teeth shone white in her dark face. "You will never be a man if you are so timid as this." And she grabbed him, threw him over her shoulder, ran through the shallow water to the beach, and dumped him in the sand. "There!" she cried. "You are the first to set foot here, the first of all!"

Everybody laughed, and Cale, winded, resentful, blushed helplessly.

For some time Cale's drifting family had been aware of the line on the horizon. They had prepared their gifts of sea fruit and carved coral, and rehearsed the songs they would sing, and carved their weapons, and here they were. They thought this was an island full of people. They were wrong. This was no island, but a continent.

Since the recovery of the world from Urlu's great Burning, there had been time enough for the continents' slow tectonic dance to play out. Africa had collided softly with Europe, Australia had kissed Asia, and Antarctica had come spinning up from the south pole. It was these great geographical changes—together with a slow, relentless heating-up of the sun—which had given the world its long summer.

While the rafts had dreamed over fecund seas, seventy million years had worn away. But even over such a tremendous interval, people were much the same as they had always been.

And now here they were, on the shore of Antarctica—and Cale was indeed the first of all.

Unsteadily he got to his feet. For a moment the world seemed to tip and rock beneath him. But it was not the world that tipped, he understood, but his own imagination, shaped by a life on the rafts.

The beach stretched around him, sloping up to a line of tall vegetation. He had never seen anything like it. His fear and resentment quickly subsided, to be replaced by curiosity.

The landing party had forgotten him already. They were gathering driftwood for a fire and unloading coils of meat—snake meat, from the fat, stupid, domesticated descendants of one of the few animals to survive the firestorm of Urlu's day. They would have a feast, and they would get drunk, and they would sleep; only tomorrow would they begin to explore.

Cale discovered he didn't want to wait that long. He turned away from the sea, and walked up the shallow slope of the beach.

A line of hard trunks towered above his head, smooth-hulled. These "trees," as his father had called them, were in fact a kind of grass, something like bamboo. Cale came from a world of endless flatness; to him these trees were mighty constructs indeed. And sunlight shone through the trees, from an open area beyond.

A few paces away a freshwater stream decanted onto the beach and trickled to the sea. Cale could see that it came from a small gully that cut through the bank of trees. It was a way through, irresistible.

The broken stones of the gully's bed stung his feet, and sharp branches scraped at his skin. The rocks stuck in the gully walls were a strange mix:

big boulders set in a greyish clay, down to pebbles small enough to have fit in Cale's hand, all jammed together. Even the bedrock was scratched and grooved, as if some immense, spiky fish had swum this way.

Here in this tropical rainforest, Cale was surrounded by the evidence of ice.

He soon reached the open area behind the trees. It was just a glade a few paces across, opened up by the fall of one mighty tree. Cale stepped forward, making for a patch of green. But iridescent wings beat, and a fat, segmented body soared up from the green, and Cale stumbled to a halt. The insect was huge, its body longer than he was tall. Now more vast dragonflies rose up, startled, huddling for protection. A sleeker form, its body yellow-banded, came buzzing out of the trees. It was a remote descendant of a wasp, a solitary predator. It assaulted the swarming dragonflies, ripping through shimmering wings. All this took place over Cale's head in a cloud of flapping and buzzing. It was too strange to be frightening.

He was distracted by a strange squirming at his feet. The patch of green from which he had disturbed the first dragonfly was itself moving, flowing over the landscape as if liquid. It was actually a crowd of creatures, a mass of wriggling worms. From the tops of tottering piles of small bodies, things like eyes blinked.

Such sights were unique to Antarctica. There was no other place like this, anywhere on Earth.

When its ice melted away, the bare ground of Antarctica became an arena for life. The first colonists had been blown on the wind from over the sea: vegetation, insects, birds. But this was not an age for birds, or indeed mammals. As the world's systems compensated for the slow heating of the sun, carbon dioxide, the main greenhouse gas, was drawn down into the sea and the rocks, and the air became oxygen-rich. The insects used this heady fuel to grow huge, and predatory wasps and cockroaches as bold as rats made short work of Antarctica's flightless birds.

And there had been time for much more dramatic evolutionary shifts, time for whole phyla to be remodeled. The squirming multiple organism that fled from Cale's approach was a descendant of the siphonophores, colonial creatures of the sea like Portuguese men o' war. Endlessly adaptable, hugely ecologically inventive, since colonizing the land these compound creatures had occupied fresh water, the ground, the branches of the grass-trees, even the air.

Cale sensed something of the transient strangeness of what he saw. Antarctica, empty of humans, had been the stage for Earth's final gesture of evolutionary inventiveness. But relentless tectonic drift had at last brought Antarctica within reach of the ocean-going communities who sailed over the flooded remnants of India, and the great experiment was about to end. Cale gazed around, eyes wide, longing to discover more.

A coral-tipped spear shot past his head, and he heard a roar. He staggered back, shocked.

A patch of green ahead of him split and swarmed away, and a huge form emerged. Grey-skinned, supported on two narrow forelegs and a powerful articulated tail, this monster seemed to be all head. A spear stuck out from its neck. The product of another transformed phylum, this

was a chondrichthyan, a distant relation of a shark. The beast opened a mouth like a cavern, and blood-soaked breath blasted over Cale.

Lia was at Cale's side. "Come on." She hooked an arm under his shoulders and dragged him away.

Back on the beach, munching on snake meat, Cale soon got over his shock. Everybody made a fuss of him as he told his tales of giant wasps and the huge land-shark. At that moment he could not imagine ever returning to the nightmares of the forest.

But of course he would. And in little more than a thousand years his descendants, having burned their way across Antarctica, accompanied by their hunting snakes and their newly domesticated attack-wasps, would hunt down the very last of the land-sharks, and string its teeth around their necks.

IV

Tura and Bel, sister and brother, grew up in a world of flatness, on a shoreline between an endless ocean and a land like a tabletop. But in the distance there were mountains, pale cones turned purple by the ruddy mist. As long as she could remember, Tura had been fascinated by the mountains. She longed to walk to them—even, she fantasized, to climb them.

But how could she ever reach them? Her people lived at the coast, feeding on the soft-fleshed descendants of neotenous crabs. The land was a plain of red sand, littered with gleaming salt flats, where nothing could live. The mountains were forever out of reach.

Then, in Tura's eleventh year, the land turned unexpectedly green.

The aging world was still capable of volcanic tantrums. One such episode, the eruption of a vast basaltic flood, had pumped carbon dioxide into the air. As flowers in the desert had once waited decades for the rains, so their remote descendants waited for such brief volcanic summers to make them bloom.

Tura and her brother hatched the plan between them. They would never get this chance again; the greening would be gone in a year, perhaps never to return in their lifetimes. No adult would ever have approved. But no adult need know.

And so, very early one morning, they slipped away from the village. Wearing nothing but kilts woven from dried sea grass, their favorite shell necklaces around their necks, they looked very alike. As they ran they laughed, excited by their adventure, and their blue eyes shone against the rusted crimson of the landscape.

Bel and Tura lived on what had once been the western coast of North America—but, just as in Urlu's dark time of global catastrophe, it didn't really matter where you lived. For this was the age of a supercontinent.

The slow convergence of the continents had ultimately produced a unity that mirrored a much earlier mammoth assemblage, broken up before the dinosaurs evolved. While vast unending storms roamed the waters of

the world-ocean, New Pangaea's interior collapsed to a desiccated wasteland, and people drifted to the mouths of the great rivers, and to the sea coasts. This grand coalescence was accompanied by the solemn drumbeat of extinction events; each time the world recovered, though each time a little less vigorously than before.

The supercontinent's annealing took two hundred million years. And since then, another two hundred million years had already gone by. But people lived much as they always had.

Tura and Bel, eleven-year-old twins, knew nothing of this. They were young, and so was their world; it was ever thus. And today, especially, was a day of wonder, as all around them plants, gobbling carbon dioxide, fired packets of spores through the air, and insects scrambled in once-in-a-lifetime quests to propagate.

As the sun climbed the children tired, their pace falling, and the arid air sucked the sweat off their bodies. But at last the mountains came looming out of the dusty air. These worn hills were ancient, a relic of the formation of New Pangaea. But to Tura and Bel, standing before their scree-covered lower slopes, they were formidable heights indeed.

Then Tura saw a splash of green and brown, high on a slope. Curiosity sparked. Without thinking about it she began to climb. Bel, always more nervous, would not follow.

Though at first the slope was so gentle it was no more than a walk, Tura was soon higher than she had ever been in her life. On she climbed, until her walk gave way to an instinctive scramble on all fours. Her heart hammering, she kept on. All around her New Pangaea unfolded, a sea of Mars-red dust worn flat by time.

At last she reached the green. It was a clump of trees, shadowed by the mountain from the dust-laden winds and nourished by water from subsurface aquifers. Instinctively Tura rubbed her hand over smooth, sturdy trunks. She had never seen trees before.

As the sun brightened, Earth's systems compensated by drawing down carbon dioxide from the air. But this was a process with a limit: even in Jaal's time the remnant carbon dioxide had been a trace. Already the planet had shed many rich ecosystems—tundra, forests, grasslands, meadows, mangrove swamps. Soon the carbon dioxide concentration would drop below a certain critical level, after which only a fraction of plants would be able to photosynthesize. The human population, already only a million strung out around the world's single coastline, would implode to perhaps ten thousand.

People would survive. They always had. But these trees, in whose cool shade Tura stood, were among the last in the world.

She peered up at branches with sparse crowns of spiky leaves, far above her head. There might be fruit up there, or water to be had in the leaves. But it was impossible; she could not climb past the smoothness of the lower trunk.

When she looked down Bel's upturned face was a white dot. The day was advancing; as the sun rode higher the going across the dry dust would be even more difficult. With regret she began her scrambled descent to the ground.

As she lived out her life on the coast of Pangaea, Tura never forgot her brief adventure. And when she thought of the trees her hands and feet itched, her body recalling ape dreams abandoned half a billion years before.

V

Ruul was bored.

All through the echoing caverns the party was in full swing. By the light of their hearths and rush torches people played and danced, talked and laughed, drank and fought, and the much-evolved descendants of snakes and wasps curled affectionately around the ankles of their owners. It was a Thousand-Day festival. In a world forever cut off from the daylight, subterranean humans pale as worms marked time by how they slept and woke, and counted off the days of their lives on their fingers.

Everyone was having fun—everyone but Ruul. When his mother was too busy to notice, he crept away into the dark.

Some time ago, restlessly exploring the edge of the inhabited cave, where tunnels and boreholes stretched on into the dark, he had found a chimney, a crack in the limestone. It looked as if you could climb up quite a way. And when he shielded his eyes, it looked to him as if there was light up there, light of a strange ruddy hue. There might be another group somewhere in the caverns above, he thought. Or it might be something stranger yet, something beyond his imagination.

Now, in the dim light of the torches, he explored the chimney wall. Lodging his fingers and toes in crevices, he began to climb.

He was escaping the party. Eleven years old, neither child nor adult, he just didn't fit, and he petulantly wished the festival would go away. But as he ascended into profound silence the climb itself consumed all his attention, and the why of it faded from his mind.

His people, cavern-bound for uncounted generations, were good at rock-climbing. They lived in caverns in deep limestone karsts, laid down in long-vanished shallow seas. Once these hollows had hosted ecosystems full of the much-evolved descendants of lizards, snakes, scorpions, cockroaches, even sharks and crocodiles. The extreme and unchanging conditions of Pangaea had encouraged intricacy and interdependency. The people, retreating underground, had allowed fragments of these extraordinary biotas to survive.

Soon Ruul climbed up out of the limestone into a softer sandstone, poorly cemented. It was easier to find crevices here. The crimson light from above was bright enough to show him details of the rock through which he was passing. There was layer upon layer of it, he saw, and it had a repetitive pattern, streaks of darkness punctuated by lumpy nodules. When he touched one of the nodules, he found a blade surface so sharp he might have cut his fingers. It was a stone axe—made, used, and dropped long ago, and buried somehow in the sediments that had made this sand-

stone. Growing more curious, he explored the dark traces. They crumbled when he dug into them with a fingernail, and he could smell ash, as fresh as if a fire had just burned here. The dark layers were hearths.

He was climbing through strata of hearths and stone tools, thousands of layers all heaped up on top of one another and squashed down into the rock. People must have lived in this place a very long time. He was oppressed by a huge weight of time, and of changelessness.

But he was distracted by a set of teeth he found, small, triangular, razor-edged. They had holes drilled in them. He carefully prized these out of the rock and put them in a pouch; perhaps he would make a necklace of them later.

With aching fingertips and toes, he continued his climb.

Unexpectedly, he reached the top of the chimney. It opened out into a wider space, a cave perhaps, filled with that ruddy light. He hoisted himself up the last short way, swung his legs out onto the floor above, and stood up.

And he was stunned.

He was standing on flat ground, a plain that seemed to go on forever. It was covered in dust, very red, so fine it stuck to the sweat on his legs. He turned slowly around. If this was the floor of a cave—well, it was a cave with no walls. And the roof above must be far away too, so far he could not see it; above him was nothing but a dome of darkness. He had no word for *sky*. And in one direction, facing him, something lifted over the edge of the world. It was a ruddy disc, perfectly circular, just a slice of it protruding over the dead-flat horizon. It was the source of the crimson light, and he could feel its searing heat.

Ruul inhabited a convoluted world of caverns and chimneys; he had never seen anything like the purity of this utterly flat plain, the perfectly circular arc of that bow of light. The clean geometric simplicity of the landscape drew his soul; he stared, entranced.

Three hundred million years after the life and death of Tura and Bel, this was what Earth had become. The sediments on which Ruul stood were the ruins of the last mountains. The magmatic currents of a cooling world had not been able to break up the new supercontinent, as they had the first. Meanwhile the sun's relentless warming continued. By now only microbes inhabited the equatorial regions, while at the poles a few hardy, tough-skinned plants were browsed by sluggish animals heavily armored against the heat. Earth was already losing its water, and Pangaea's shoreline was rimmed by brilliant-white salt flats.

But the boy standing on the eroded-flat ground was barely changed from his unimaginably remote ancestors, from Tura and Cale and Urlu and even Jaal. It had never been necessary for humans to evolve significantly, for they always adjusted their environment so they didn't have to—and in the process stifled evolutionary innovation.

It was like this everywhere. After the emergence of intelligence, the story of any biosphere tended to get a lot simpler. It was a major reason for the silence of the stars.

But on Earth a long story was ending. In not many generations from now, Ruul's descendants would succumb; quietly baked in their desiccated-

ing caves, they would not suffer. Life would go on, as archaic thermophilic microbes spread their gaudy colors across the land. But man would be gone, leaving sandstone strata nearly a billion years deep full of hearths and chipped stones and human bones.

"Ruul! Ruul! Oh, there you are!" His mother, caked by red dust, was clambering stiffly out of the chimney. "Somebody said you came this way. I've been frantic. Oh, Ruul—what are you doing?"

Ruul spread his hands, unable to explain. He didn't want to hurt his mother, but he was excited by his discoveries. "Look what I found, mother!" "What?"

He babbled excitedly about hearths and tools and bones. "Maybe people lived here in great heaps, and the smoke of their fires rose up to the sky. Mother, will we come to live here again?"

"Perhaps one day," his mother said at random, to hush him.

But that wasn't answer enough for Ruul. Restless, curious, he glanced around once more at the plain, the rising sun. To him, this terminal Earth was a place of wonder. He longed to explore. "Let me go on. Just a little further!"

"No," his mother said gently. "The adventure's over. It's time to go. Come now." And she put her arm around his shoulders, and led him home. ○

ECONOMY

Gravimov flatimov

Isaac Asimov

moved here from Russia when
just past age two.

Candy store genius of
phantasmagorical
stories of robots, he
made three laws do.

—Mario Milosevic

Richard Mueller tells us, "One of my students says that everything I write is a love letter. Well, this story certainly is. I started writing SF in the eighties and got distracted by television. After years of penning TV scripts, I've come back to my roots—more stories and novels to follow." The author's last tale for us, "Meditations on the Death of Cortes," appeared in our September 1988 issue. His latest story takes us along on the hair-raising tale of . . .

CLIPPER'S LAST RIDE

Richard Mueller

Sometimes you never get it figured out until it's over and you can no longer influence the situation. Sometimes it makes no difference whether you figure it out or not.

Her name was Marie Dessalines, but that was too difficult a handle out on the frontier, so everyone just called her Clipper. Clipper because she was the town barber and Clipper because of her attitude. She was not to be trifled with, bothered, or harassed, because her tongue was legendary, venomous, and sharp. She had hermitized, a trait common among the older hands, and when she was not cutting hair she kept to her dusty second-floor walkup. She played the guitar up there, which we knew only because we could hear it and because I ordered her replacement strings through the C.S.A.

As she cut their hair, she listened to her customers; puffed-up Company men and their wives, bitching scraper drag miners, shopkeepers and shopgirls, whores, and prospectors eking out a living on phosrock dredging. And, of course, the soldiers from the post on the river. She came closest to having a rapport with them, trading the occasional rude joke but never letting down her guard. She'd turn away passes politely the first time, the second time with a swift and pointed slash of the tongue. Few tried after that. There was the occasional idiot who persisted beyond her

stated limits and was either eighty-sixed from her shop for six months, or, in one case, was found behind the grader barns with his balls kicked in. Most assumed that some friend of hers, some admirer, did the deed. I wasn't so sure.

My name is Toby Marcks and I'm the Town Scribe; or at least I was. I put out the weekly two-sheet paper, ran the little Carnegie Library, and read and wrote letters for those who couldn't. I ordered vids and disks. I counseled those who were trying to improve themselves. I also did a thrice weekly shift on the phone exchange and taught a few classes in Reading, Writing, and History, plus a weekly lecture out at the fort in Strategy and Military Science.

I wasn't wild about that but, as a major cashiered from the Jump Marines, I was open to more than a bit of harassment myself. When they tear your stripes off and brand you on Karoly, you quickly move to Kessel or Trad. And when they start calling you killer and coward, you wind up on a world like Mendoza Four, a dustball with a population of fewer than fifty thousand humans, six million reclusive locals called skulks, and the usual plant and animal absurdities. Mendoza Four had air and water and seven minerals that were valuable enough to exploit, but not too valuable. Not valuable enough to make M-4 into a paradise or even an acceptable suburb. It was an outback; a treeless, dustbowl shithole, and that's why we were there.

Tradition has it that your past doesn't matter on the frontier, and that is mostly true. Tradition holds that these low-tech, armstrong worlds were the place to go if you wanted to disappear. I knew perhaps eighty of the five hundred-odd people in Riverton, and of less than a dozen could I put stories to faces. You were as anonymous as you wanted to be, so long as you didn't cause trouble, because the frontier, contrary to space-opera romances, does not tolerate crime. In the three years since I'd arrived in Riverton, I'd seen three hangings and a dozen floggings. There were no other punishments. We were dusty, tired, quiet, and polite.

Like everyone else, I got my hair cut at Clipper's. She always smiled when I came in, and called me Toby.

"Hey, Clipper."

I'd sit in the chair, she'd wet my hair with filtered river water, and give me a good haircut. I wouldn't talk much at all, nor would she. Finally, one day, she said, "I like you, Toby."

"You do?"

"Yeah. You're quiet and you don't bug me." And that was that. I think it was six months before she spoke to me again. She'd see me at the library or in the street, and nod and favor me with the briefest smile, but she never spoke. Not until Christmas Eve.

I'd been out to the fort in the morning to teach a map-reading class to the officers and non-coms. There were only three aspects to the local map: the desert, the river, and the town. The town included the fort, the town

proper, the processing plant, and the landing field. Phosrock broke down somewhere along a tonne of ore processed down to sixty kilograms of formate, an essential ingredient in the new deep-space tracking systems. There was a lot of phosrock about; the graders brought it in, the shakers broke it up, the cookers brewed it down, and, every twenty days or so, a bulk hauler landed at the field and took it away. Of course, that was before the graders started disappearing.

At any rate, I'd spent that morning on Orienteering and Navigation, gave a twenty minute talk on establishing a defensive perimeter around the town (which was absurd, as there was nothing to establish it with), and then, in my Classic Battles series, gave a brief recapitulation of Imphal and the Admin Box Fight back in World War II on Earth. The officers and non-coms were polite and attentive and kept their opinions of me to themselves. After all, I may have been drummed out, but I was a combat vet, which most of them were not.

As I was leaving the fort, a young Warrant named Brooks stopped me. He was freshfaced, concerned, and younger than my son. He took me aside.

"Toby." No one called me Mr. Marcks. I was wearing a khaki T-shirt and carrying my jacket, and the brand scars were bright on my arm. He certainly wasn't going to call me Major.

"What is it?"

"There may be a problem. We have a two-man patrol overdue."

"Boat patrol or sand skimmer?"

"Boat."

Colonel Krikerian was always sending out patrols, mostly to keep the men busy. They ranged far and wide, took occasional pictures of the skulks, and got sunburned. Once or twice in the last few years, a patrol had vanished and no one thought much about it. They were usually deserters, and got picked up on the road to Klissoura. A few probably tried crossing the desert and died.

"Think they skedaddled?"

Brooks shook his head. "Not Sergeant Onishi and Private Broyles. They're too army."

He was right. They were probably the last two grunts who'd rabbit. Maybe they'd come to harm, but I couldn't see how. The skulks seemed to have no interest in us. The men knew better than to eat any of the local plants. And, outside of nug-wolves and whistlegrippers (both of which were inordinately shy) and the striped badger-crabs that swarmed in certain stretches of the river, the biggest things we knew about were the frogs.

The frogs were actually ungulates, who walked with all the grace of grounded bats and looked like great leathery wildebeests, hornless and with legs that bent in all the wrong places. They were about the size of terrestrial mules, their great rubbery faces set in perpetual grins as they wandered about, sniffing the things of man and eating his garbage. After the inevitable shock of seeing them, most people ignored them completely. Except Clipper.

To secure a large scientific grant, Phosrock Mining maintained a re-

search station to study local fauna: that generally meant the frogs. They kept a feeding station for them and pens, but most of the frogs wandered free and that was what I knew about them, until Christmas Eve, when there was a knock on my door. I opened it to find Clipper.

Clipper stood just over one hundred and fifty centimeters and probably didn't tip forty-five kilograms. She was painfully thin and her arms looked like they were made of steel cables. Her eyes were blue and deep, her straight teeth showed in a crooked smile, and her braided brown hair was shot with gray. I'd have guessed her age at about forty, but out here on the frontier it was hard to tell. She was beautiful in a way that deserts are beautiful. She was also a cantankerous, silent loner, and she was standing on my doorstep.

"Clipper."

"Toby? Could I ask ya a favor? Got somethin' I want ya to look at."

I nodded, grabbed my jacket and followed her down to the street, walking along a half-step behind her. She glanced at me, her face set with concern.

"Where we going, Clipper?"

"To see the frogs."

It was the first time I realized that she had an interest in anything but her guitar and her barbershop. "You mean down to the Research Station?"

She laughed derisively. "Doc Beecraft is a damn drunk. He feeds 'em and turns in reports that go nowhere, and the Company gets its money. But they're not just big dumb brutes. Not at all."

As we approached the pens where five of the frogs were standing, they all came to the fence. Clipper whispered softly to them, patting their great flat heads. After a moment, I joined her. Their skin was soft and cool and they responded like great gentle dogs, bobbing noiselessly, their lips quivering.

"Come on," she said, and climbed over the fence. I followed her to a dark corner of the pen, where a frog was lying on its side, seemingly gasping out its last breaths. "I found him like this earlier. He was healthy last night, but I dunno now. I think he's dyin' but I can't figure why."

I took her light and began to go over every inch of the critter's body. I wasn't sure what I was looking for, but I'd been in a half-dozen fights in my years in the Jump Marines, and I'd seen all manner of illness and injury. It took me less than five minutes to find the hole.

"You got a medical kit or something?" She disappeared inside the Research Station and came back lugging a good-sized toolbox.

"I guess this stuff works," she said. Inside there were salves and ointments, bandages and surgical instruments. I knew what I was looking for: a long, needle-nosed pliers.

She found one. "What do you want me to do?"

"Can you steady him?"

She put her hands on the creature's face and leaned low, her braid brushing the rubbery hide as she whispered softly to it. I probed the hole, pretty sure of what I'd find. The frog squirmed a few times and then gave a great blubbering sigh as I grasped the object and drew it out.

"What is that?" she said as I held it up.

"A crossbow bolt. Know anyone with a crossbow?"

Her face darkened in anger. "Critchell, the plant manager. That rotten kid of his. I'll kill him—"

I grabbed her by the arms and she froze. "No," I said. "No, you won't." Then I let go. She pulled her arms back as if she was surprised that they were still attached to her body, and I realized that no one touched this woman. Ever.

"Why not?" she said tensely, rubbing her arms where I'd held them.

"Because, if they hang you, who'll cut my hair?"

I drained the puncture of viscous blue fluid and applied an anti-bacterial cream. While Clipper dressed the wound, I looked around. The frogs were drawn up in a semi-circle, watching us curiously, and I got the impression that these creatures might be smarter than they looked. As Clipper finished, the wounded frog stumbled to its feet and shook itself. Then, with what sounded like a grateful sigh, it limped off toward the food pens. We put our backs to the fence and watched as it fed.

"Thank you, Toby."

"My pleasure." Her shoulder was up against mine. It was a new feeling. It had been years since I'd rubbed elbows with anyone but a whore or a bargirl, and that had been some time in either case. "I like animals," I said, "and there's no horses on this rock, no cats, dogs, birds. Just these guys."

"There's more to them than meets the eye. I like 'em—"

"Yeah, I know. They don't talk much." I smiled. "Like me."

"Like you," she said, looking at me, but when I looked back she turned away. And then she did the last thing I expected. She started to talk.

"I never meant to end up here, Toby. I'm pretty small. I coulda been a rigger or a tube monkey, but I didn't have the math. So, I became a jockey."

"A jockey?"

"On Asterion, at New Ascot Downs. Ever been there?"

I nodded. "When I was a captain I lost a month's pay there in twenty minutes."

"Well, that's what they do. I was ridin' silks there, an' I was good. I'd ride three, four, sometimes five races a day. My husband, Tim, was a track official, in charge of books, licensing, payouts, and fees; all the financial stuff I didn't understand." Her face grew wistful as she added, "I did love that man."

She paused, shook her head sadly and repeated it. "I *did* love him." I nodded.

"But he was gamblin' and I didn't know about it. He got in deep and he was usin' every trick he knew to skim off money, but it wasn't enough. He couldn't pay the vig. Finally, he agreed to fix a race."

"For you to fix it."

"Yeah," she said sadly. "When he told me, I couldn't believe it. I said no, and he said they'd kill him. I hated it, hated everythin' about it, but in the end I agreed, and we got caught."

"They're picky about cheating on Asterion. I was in jail for three days and then I found myself standing with Tim before the judge. They found

us guilty and Tim kissed me a last time. Then they took him out of the courtroom. A moment later, they put a gun to his head and killed him. I heard the shot.

"They were lenient with me. I guess they felt sorry for me. I was marched to the port and put aboard the first ship out with a ticket to the end of the line." She encompassed the dark buildings of Riverton with a wave of her hand. "The end of the line." She paused for a long time. "I never rode a horse again. I miss that."

"The end of the line." We were silent for minutes, watching the frogs feed and wander about in seemingly aimless patterns.

"Toby, I never told anyone else that story."

"It's safe with me."

"Thanks." She looked at the slick burn marks on my arm where the branding iron had seared deep, then reached out a finger and touched one. I smiled and nodded.

"I was on a little chunk of rock out in the Helios Group, in charge of a reduced battalion of Marines. We were there to put down a violent uprising in the mining colonies. They mine crystals out there, valuable stuff, and the miners wanted more of a share. I was in sympathy, but, hell, I had my duty.

"It went on much too long: patrols, negotiations, agitation. Pretty soon, my men were beginning to talk, and I knew that I could lose control of the situation. My sergeant was an ex-miner named Farrell, and he started stirring up the others, so I cut orders to have him transferred and disrated. When he found out, he decided to open the armory to the miners and change sides. I caught him in the act and shot him."

Clipper was staring at me. "They shoulda given you a medal, something. . . ."

Yeah, maybe, but they didn't. "Clipper, the Corps is funny about that. Oh, I got the benefit of the doubt right up until my court martial, but the J.A.G. officers came after me and I didn't have enough corroborating evidence. My attorney did his best, but in the end I was stripped, branded, and marched off the post. I was lucky, I suppose. I could have gotten Danny Deever."

"Danny Deever?"

"Hanged. Not my idea of a good time. And if that wasn't bad enough, my wife left me and my son, who's in the army, hasn't written to me in five years. So like you, I took the long ship out to the end of the line, and here I am."

"Thanks for telling me, Toby."

As we were leaving, Clipper stopped and put a hand on my arm. "I wanna show you one more thing," she said and raised a finger to her lips. The whistle she blew was low, nearly inaudible, but almost immediately a rather large frog loomed up out of the darkness. She put her thin arms around its head and hugged it. "Toby, this is Gray."

"Hello, Gray," I said and reached out to pet it. It flared its nostrils and gave out a soft, bubbling snort.

"Now, Gray, he's a friend." She stroked the flat ridge above its eyes. "Be nice."

This time, Gray suffered in silence as I petted it, but he was obviously a one-woman frog. Then Clipper motioned me clear, and, before I could speak, she vaulted neatly onto Gray's back, slipping her feet in behind its massive forelegs. She patted Gray and it took off down the street with her in a rolling gait reminiscent of a camel.

Amazed, I watched as they vanished in the dark, then shot back past me moving as fast as a sand skimmer. Clipper was laying low on Gray's neck. "Incredible," I said as they returned and Clipper dismounted.

"Another secret," she said. "He's a big boy and I'm small, so he can carry me, but he likes it, too."

"And no one knows about this?" I asked.

"I don't think so."

"Good."

She stepped up to me then and put her hand on my shoulder, her eyes searching mine, and then gave me the lightest, softest kiss. "Thank you, Toby. Sleep well."

I lay in bed for a long time, my mind racing, trying to take it all in. There seemed to be a grinding sound in the back of my brain as my walls of non-involvement and self-imposed celibacy began to crumble. Clipper's face was still in my mind as I slipped off to sleep.

The door opened and then closed before I could come fully awake. I felt Clipper slip into bed beside me, clothed, her arms going around my chest. "Toby, just hold me and don't speak. Just let me stay with you, please."

I gave her a squeeze to let her know that I understood. "Thank you," she said, then, "you're the first man I've kissed since they shot Tim."

I pressed my lips to her forehead and somehow we drifted off to sleep. I felt my anxieties settling into a state of peace, but it was not to last.

The knock on my door was loud and insistent, and it pulled me up like a hangman's rope. Clipper was gone, as if she'd never been there. Perhaps she hadn't. I pulled on my pants and opened the door. It was Brooks, the young officer.

"Sir, Captain Selby's downstairs. He wants to see you at once."

There was a sand skimmer parked inconspicuously in the alley, not that the locals hadn't seen it. Four heavily armed troopers were unloading boxes of guns. Selby was a tall, stolid officer who, out of boredom, always asked digressive questions at my lectures. "It's that serious?"

"Yessir, I do believe it is." Selby spoke softly, filling me in. A maintenance driver had come upon two abandoned graders down on the river road. They were empty and there was blood all over the cabs. And yesterday, Colonel Krikerian had taken a boat upstream to catch some badger-crabs for Christmas Day dinner. The boat had drifted up this morning, all chewed up.

"Blood?"

"Yes," Selby said. "This is a mess. I wish we had decent radios on this fucking rock."

Due to the nearness of an Abesaar source and an incredible amount of

crap flying through Mendoza's orbit, radio ranges were extremely limited and needed frequent repeater stations to cut through the interference. The mining companies had compensated by laying old-fashioned phone lines everywhere: but phone lines could be broken.

"You're going to tell me that the land lines are dead."

"Since around midnight."

"Skulks?"

"I don't know what else it could be."

Selby unrolled a map on the hood of his skimmer. "Major." I knew it was serious for him to call me by my old rank. "Something's going on. Whether it's planetwide or local, I don't know, but we must assume that we are cut off. The next bulk hauler isn't due in here for four days. Until then, we have to button-up and hang on. We're giving you weapons and I'm putting you in charge of Riverton under Article XIX of the Code."

"And my orders?"

"Hold the town unless you think it can't be defended. In that case, retire on the fort."

I looked around at the rickety aluminum and structite buildings, the dusty open streets, my confused and curious neighbors. I looked for Clipper, but I didn't see her. Riverton was laid out on an open grid with one side on a low bluff overlooking the river. There wasn't a ridge, berm, ditch, or cliff within a thousand yards. There wasn't a tree closer than the park in Klissoura, forty klics away. Selby, his nerves raw with the newness of his command, was looking expectantly at me.

"Whaddaya think?"

"I think we couldn't defend this town from a troupe of nuns if we blew it up and hid in the rubble. We're going with you."

There were 521 people in Riverton, most of them watching as Captain Selby climbed up on the bed of his skimmer and laid out the problem. He told them what had happened to the colonel, the graders, the phone lines. He detailed what we knew of the skulks, as most of the civilians had never seen one. They were humanoid bipeds who could drop to all fours and move across the ground almost as fast as a skimmer. They were normally very shy, and indistinguishable from the desert terrain unless you came at them with IR gear, though their body temperature often matched the background Celsius and it was easy to miss them. Skulks fed off lichen and insects, ate little, metabolized everything, and were supremely adapted to the local conditions. An unwary nug-wolf could feed six skulks for a week.

A skulk could easily be dangerous to a man because of its sharp teeth and the very efficient stone weapons it fabricated, but, until now, none had ever turned hostile. A single skulk was no match for a man with a gun, but thousands, all wild with bloodlust and moving in a wave, was a different story. The average skulk topped off around fifty kilograms. Selby claimed to have seen a startled one outrun his skimmer, a feat that the experts said was impossible.

After Selby finished I got up. "Army just put me in charge of town defense," I said. A few raised their eyebrows at that, so I added, "cause I got a military background." I held out my branded arm. "Ex-Marine."

A few of the old hands laughed at that, and I saw Clipper watching from the front of her shop. "How many other ex-military we got here?"

A sprinkling of hands went up. "Start handing out these rifles. Now, as head of Town Defense, I say we can't hold this place against a determined attack, so I want all the graders and skimmers from the plant brought in. You got half an hour to pack one bag."

The soldiers were sent out to the plant to bring in the skimmers and graders, while the townspeople immediately started to argue. "Look," I said finally, "I can't make you go, but if you stay behind, I want your names and next of kin."

In the end, we got fewer than a hundred willing to abandon their homes. I was happy to see that Clipper had donned a backpack and was standing between Gray and another frog. "Good to see you're with us."

She set her jaw. "I ain't with us," she said. "I'm with you and I'm takin' the frogs."

I almost said that frogs weren't edible but I thought better of it. "Try not to let 'em straggle then. And get yourself a sidearm."

She gave me a very serious salute and walked off toward the research pens. Then, as they used to say in the Corps, motivation took hold. The army skimmer that had gone out to the plant came bounding back blowing its siren and skidded up into what passed for our town square. Half the siding had been torn off the flatbed and only one of the soldiers was aboard. He was hysterical. Selby and I dragged him off the skimmer and got a drink into him.

"I couldn't believe it," he babbled, his face contorted and speckled with blood. "We'd just keyed in the guidance systems on the graders and the guys was coming back to the skimmer when the skulks came out of nowhere, like a wave of mud, but they had knives and spears and they was howlin'. God! I never heard a sound like that in my life! Lindy and Merch ran, but the skulks were faster and they fell right under them things. Cherry made it to the flatbed and we took off, but they got in front of us. We was shooting and they was going down and they kept grabbing at the skimmer. I thought they was gonna tip us over. Then Cherry was gone and I was through 'em and they're coming this way." He grabbed Selby's arm. "They're coming this way, Cap!"

"Okay, Lewis. Calm down. Get yourself cleaned up." Selby looked at me. "You heard him. That means no graders. We'd better get moving."

People scattered in all directions and within ten minutes all but twelve holdouts were headed for the fort. A half-dozen skimmers crammed with armed men led the way and Clipper brought up the rear with about forty frogs. We were expecting Hell to hit us at any moment and we didn't have long to wait.

We were halfway there, the fort still hidden behind an intervening hill, when we first heard the call of the skulks. It was faint, like the howling of a distant wind, but people stopped in ones and twos to listen as the sound rose on the air. "Get the skimmers and gunners on the north side," yelled Selby, running to help Brooks with the heavy gauss pintle mount on the cargo skimmer. "And don't straggle or move out forward or they'll pick you off."

I sprinted over to where Clipper was herding the frogs. She had a pistol in one hand and a whistle in the other. She looked tired and frustrated. "They respond to the whistle," she said. "I dunno what else to do."

"Well, if it comes to it, you get on Gray and get outta here," I said, squeezing between two of the frogs to get to her. "I don't want you . . ." I couldn't finish the thought. She took my hand.

"Yeah, our timing sure stinks, doesn't it?"

"We'll be all right."

"Thanks, Toby." She flashed me a smile and then her head jerked up. I heard her intake of breath. "My God . . ." I looked.

The entire horizon seemed to bubble up with skulks, and then they were moving, heading our way. I powered up my gauss rifle. "Clipper, keep them moving," I said, and ran out to join the line of armed men and skimmers.

"Wait till they get in close," yelled Brooks, but the damned things were moving way too fast.

"Belay that," I cried. "Shoot and keep shooting."

We poured it on, sixteen rifles and pistols and the pintle mount on the skimmer. We raked the oncoming horde, knocking them down, tearing apart dozens, hundreds, and still they swept on, only slowing as they had to climb over their own dead. But they weren't stupid. When they realized that they couldn't just roll us under, they began to shift around, to try to flank us from behind.

We ran to cover, pulling out exhausted battery packs and cramming fresh ones into the receivers. The skulks had only managed to pick off a few of the stupid who'd panicked and run, but time was on their side. They'd fishhook in behind us and get in among the civilians, and it would be all over. I stayed close to Clipper, determined that whatever happened, she wouldn't suffer. Maybe she was thinking the same thing about me. Then the skulks came over the hill on the other flank, and we couldn't cover it.

I steadied my rifle and watched them come. Clipper was beside me. And then Gray raised his great flat head and began to keen, a high wailing dirge that sounded like a cross between a bagpipe and a wounded animal. In turn, each frog began to make that same sound, the wails rising in a crescendo of howls that first undercut, then topped, and, finally, silenced the skulks.

"Toby, look."

The skulks had stopped their charge and edged back, milling about. There were a few more shots, a few more skulks fell, and then Selby was running along the line, yelling at the men to stop firing. "What the hell's going on, Major?"

I looked at Clipper, who had her arms around Gray and was whispering to him. "I think the skulks are afraid of our frogs," I said. "Fear, religious reverence, some olfactory thing, I dunno."

"And what's with Clipper?"

"She's kind to them. They like her."

"Can she get them to screen the column?"

It took a terrifying hour to organize while the skulks circled around us

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and the frightened townspeople cowered inside the ring of frogs. But with Clipper and Gray leading, we got them moving, with a line of frogs on each side. An hour later, under the guns of Fort Hamilton, we straggled through the gates until the quadrangle was packed with townspeople and frogs. We had lost eight on the road and twelve in the town, but there were still thousands of skulks out there and there was no telling if they would ever leave.

I turned over my brief command to Captain Selby and went to find Clipper. She was moving around among our frogs, trying to quiet them, but it was plain from their unsettling hoots that they were restless and unhappy with being cooped up. Add to that the townspeople talking all at once, and the crackle of defensive fire from the walls, and it was sheer bedlam. Clipper yelled to me above the noise.

"Toby, they can't stay in here. They'll go mad and stampede or worse. They need to leave. I've got an idea."

"Tell me."

She did. It was a good idea but it froze my blood to hear it.

"Come on."

We found Selby on the Observation Tower. His gunners were carefully picking their shots, breaking up probes and concentrations. Floodlights and sweeps kept the approaches clear and so far they were doing a good job, but Captain Selby looked anything but happy.

"We've got food and water for a week if we're careful, and we can shoot for days," he said. "The problem is gunners."

"They look pretty good."

"They are, but every one is on a gun right now. In six or eight hours, they're going to start falling asleep, and the skulks don't seem to get tired."

"I can shoot," I said.

"So can I," said Selby. "So that means fourteen gunners for twelve guns. It ain't enough, Major. In seventy-two hours at the most, it should be over." He glanced at Clipper and me. "You two wanna use my office? It's not much, but you should have a chance to say goodbye."

Clipper looked at me and then at Selby. "There's something else," she said. "We gotta get the frogs outta here. They're gonna panic. And they ain't doin' any good behind these walls."

"Yeah, okay," Selby said, distracted. "Maybe they'll break up the skulks for a while."

"Actually, she had another idea," I said.

I felt Clipper's hand in mine. Our eyes met, and then she said, "Yeah. I think if I start now, I can reach Klissoura in two days."

"How?"

"On Gray." Selby stared at her as if she was completely crazy. "Gray's the big frog," she said. "I can ride him."

"She can," I added. "I saw her. if she can get there and send back a dozen bulk haulers, they could pull us out of here."

"You can really ride these things?"

"You got another idea?"

Selby watched the big tower gauss cannon break up a determined rush. "What do you need from me?"

Clipper ticked off the list. "Sidearm, map, compass, food and water for me and Gray."

"Anything else?"

"A half hour in your office."

It was tentative, almost innocent. After, I held her against me and we talked. "Not the way I imagined it."

"Me either," she said.

"You gonna be okay to drive?" I asked. She buried her head against my chest and laughed.

"You're funny," she said. "I always thought you'd be funny."

"And you're pretty sweet when you let down that hardass face."

"Shh. Don't tell anyone."

I looked in her eyes. "Can you do this?"

"I have to."

And that was that. We dressed and walked down to the quadrangle. I made her take a first aid pack and she grabbed my service cap and squashed it down on her head. The frogs milled around restlessly as four men prepared to pull back the doors. Clipper climbed nimbly onto Gray's back. The big frog gave a happy snort, and the other frogs suddenly grew tense, realizing that their moment of freedom was at hand. Clipper reached down and took my hand.

"No tears now. I'll be back with the Marines."

"We'll be here," I said, feeling things I hadn't felt in years, things I no longer knew how to express. I released her hand, then raised a fist in the air. The doors were pulled back and Gray bounded forward.

I was running after the frogs as they poured out into the desert. As I plunged through the door, Selby grabbed me by the arm.

"Ride, Clipper!" I cried. "You ride!"

Selby pulled me back in and the doors shut behind us.

Clipper and Gray led the frogs straight through the skulks, their ranks falling back in confusion as their mortal enemies disappeared into the growing dusk. Then, as if they knew that they had been cheated of some promised prize, the skulks turned and roared, howling toward the fort. For six hours, we poured fire into them. Ten times they reached the slanting walls and started to climb. Three times they topped the parapets and were battled back hand to hand, and then the assault was over, and we were back to waiting and shooting as the horrible game began again.

We attempted to train gunners, but it's not a skill you can learn on the fly, so we worked the guns until we fell exhausted at our posts, and tried everything we could to keep them away. We lobbed mine charges into the dark. We let them get in close and raked them with enfilading fire. We fired starshells and followed them up with concussion charges. And the seconds went by like cold heartbeats. As one day passed into the next, we kept kicking each other awake and back to the guns; and whenever I closed my eyes, I saw her face.

And then Selby was shaking me awake. "We got incoming lights," he said. "Come on."

We stumbled up to the parapet and I saw them. Landing craft. The lights separated, moving to four points equidistant from the fort. And then they laid down such a volume of fire that nothing could live in it. While we were winning, I fell asleep.

I have vague recollections of something happening after that, but I next came to on the fast picket flyer taking me to Klissoura. I heard the crewmen talking, about how three towns had gone under and how it was something that Riverton had held out, and the incredible woman who'd brought the news on the back of a frog. And I slept again.

She looked so very small in the bed with her bandages and tubes, sleeping while the monitors watched her hover between this world and the next. I sat by the bed and held her hand.

"Toby."

"Hi, Clipper."

"You made it."

"We did, thanks to you and Gray."

She closed her eyes and started to cry and I wiped her tears and held her as much as I could, and then she told me her story.

We broke through like I thought we would. We were running along the road and I could hear the guns behind us. I knew that the road was the quickest way and we had to keep to it and I kept talking to Gray and talking to you. He ran so well. He was a thoroughbred, as good as any horse I ever rode, and I loved him, Toby. He was all heart. He couldn't leave me at any time, but he didn't. He stayed.

We passed Riverton, which was deserted, and by the time we were on the main road, the sun was up. I guess Gray was getting tired, because he slowed and stopped. I knew he was tired and I knew I couldn't make him go on. So I curled up under him and we slept.

His snorting woke me up, and when I crawled out I saw about a dozen skulks creeping up on us, so I jumped on his back and we broke free and through them. They threw spears, and one hit Gray in the flank and one hit me in the leg, and as soon as we got outta range I bandaged us up.

By the afternoon, we came to Red Cliff, and it looked like the skulks must have surprised the people there, because there was blood everywhere and no one alive. Gray was all right, but my leg was starting to hurt bad so I drained it and rewrapped it, and then we rested at dusk because I didn't want to have to stop in the dark.

After Red Cliff, the road goes up into the hills and Gray kept moving, and sometimes I slept. We must have stopped for a while, because when the sun came up we were on the scarp above Helena Plain and we could see Klissoura in the distance, and between us an' them were all of these skulks, dozens, hundreds, thousands, doin' whatever it is they do and waitin' for us. And there was nothing for it, Toby. We had to go in or all of you were dead.

We made our way down to the floor of the Valley and I knew that Klissoura was fifteen, maybe twenty klics ahead, and that Gray was no horse, and I didn't know how much he had left in him. But I talked to him and I sang to him, and I thought of you, Toby, and I made you promises I knew I couldn't keep even though I wanted to, because I knew I was going to die.

The little bands of skulks shied away but the big ones were bolder and it was a big bunch that jumped us, swarmed all over us, hitting and hacking, and I was shooting and I thought that Gray was going to go down, but he struggled up and ran hard and we got away. But they'd cut him badly and they'd blinded him in one eye and he was keening. And they'd broken my left hand and a rib and cut my arms and hit me hard in the stomach, and I knew that that was the bad one.

But Gray kept on and we moved toward the lights, and suddenly there were gunboats overhead and then Gray collapsed in the dark and I knew he was gone. He'd taken me so far and he gave his life for me, and for us, Toby, and I'm so sorry it didn't work out like I wanted.

She closed her eyes then and I turned off the recorder, and, for a long time, I thought she was sleeping. Then she opened her eyes and looked at me. "I wish I had words for you, Toby. None of this was how I planned. It all just happened, but I'm glad we . . ."

"It's all right, Clipper. I feel the same way. We'll talk about it later, when you're better." She smiled and shook her head, once, a tiny movement, then fell asleep, her hand in mine.

And, sometime in the night, she died.

The skulks vanished back into the deep deserts as quickly as they'd come, leaving over a million dead behind, not to mention eight thousand humans. Almost the moment that Mendoza Four was secured, the scientists began arriving, eager to examine everything. I got the Hell out of Dodge. I ran down to Riverton to collect my stuff. I also picked up Clipper's barber tools, and, seeing nothing else of worth in the shop, I went by her flat.

Skulks had no interest in the things of men, so her life here had remained untouched. I packaged up her personal effects to be sent to her family, presuming I could find them, and decided to keep her guitar. I also found her drawings. She had quite a portfolio of sketches. I was amazed at the quality and artistry.

I became the Chief Librarian of the Central Library in Klissoura. From my office window, I can see the park and the statue of Clipper and Gray, riding forever to the rescue. Her pictures, the best of her self portraits and one that she'd done of me, hang on the wall of my apartment. On my lunch hours, I walk across to the park and sit by her statue and we talk of old times. And I'm learning to play the guitar. ○

—For Yvonne Dauphin

KILLING TIME

Kristine Kathryn Rusch

According to our contracts manager, Scott Lais, Kristine Kathryn Rusch is the first person since Isaac Asimov to have stories in all four Dell magazines in the same year. This was accomplished in 2004 with "Thorns" in the January/February *Alfred Hitchcock*; "ProtectVision" in *Ellery Queen's* May issue; two stories in *Asimov's*—"Forest for the Trees" in July and "Collateral Damage" in August—and, finally, "Paparazzi of Dreams" in the November *Analog*. The author's latest SF novel, *Buried Deep*, has just come out from Roc, and a new Nelscott mystery, *War at Home*, was released from St. Martin's in March.

JP pedals her ancient Schwinn with Paula on the handlebars, laughing, her head thrown back. Paula keeps her bare feet outstretched, afraid that her toes will get caught in the spokes. The morning is bright, the sun a yellow demon that will create haze in the afternoon. It is seven AM. It is summer. And they are off to play tennis before the arrival of the blistering heat.

"Mrs. Farris?"

Even at fifteen, she is pear-shaped, this girl who is Paula's best friend. Her black hair is cut short around her too-small face and her torso is long, ungainly. Her hips are wide and her legs seem to have come from another body, particularly this morning, looking long and narrow in her tennis shorts. Her extremely white Keds reflect the paleness of her skin.

Paula is better proportioned but too thin. Paula's shorts are tiny, her shirt loose, and her tennis shoes scuffed with the overwork she has put them through. Paula's not athletic either, but she loves tennis—the way the ball bounces on the court, the whoosh of the racket as it moves through the air, the wobble of the fabric net in the early morning breeze.

Paula and JP play now so that no one will see them—two uncoordinated girls, trying to become famous, like Billie Jean King, their heroine. They can't even bat the ball back and forth more than twice, but they try.

They giggle and they run and they sweat, finally collapsing in a heap against the wire mesh walls someone has thoughtfully erected around the high school's tennis court.

Of course, they don't think of bringing water or breakfast. They're not practical. They just lean their sticky bodies against each other, and wonder if it's too early to ride to the city pool where Michael Tomlin lifeguards. Michael and Paula used to go together, and he still has a crush on her.

JP believes Paula still has a crush on him too, and she might not be wrong. JP has always known Paula better than she has known herself.

"Mrs. Farris. Concentrate."

The pool water is hot and a little too green. The chlorine smell is strong. Paula levers herself out with her arms, and sprawls on the rough concrete edge.

JP is in the shallow end, splashing water at Mark Burde, who looks a little pudgy in his baggy swim trunks. JP thinks he's cute. Paula thinks he's a freak, and a dumb one at that. But JP isn't into brains like Paula is. JP's smarts are the people kind. Paula prefers books.

Michael's not here this morning. He didn't show, which isn't unusual given his home life. Paula grabs her towel and sashes to the burned grass outside the concrete perimeter. Kids scream and laugh, paddling around with their plastic toys. A few older boys cannonball off the diving board, dousing everyone.

She closes her eyes and wishes she's out of here, somewhere else, somewhere glamorous where she doesn't know everyone and no one knows her. She—

"Mrs. Farris?"

Oh, that voice disturbs her. She opens her eyes. They feel gummy, as if she's been asleep for a long time.

And maybe she has. She doesn't remember this room, painted a soothing blue, with steel lamps and instruments pushed off to the side. She's not on a bed; she's on some kind of cot. There are bars on either side, with controls near her fingertips.

A hospital bed, then.

Her daughter, Kimberly, perches at the foot, her hands clasped. She has that bright-eyed expression that means she wants something desperately to succeed. She's gotten that expression ever since she was a little girl, and that expression has made her seem too eager, too needy, too intense.

Behind her, a thin man with a shiny face clutches a clipboard. He wears a white smock and has a stethoscope around his neck, but something tells Paula Farris that he's not a doctor. At least, not the kind she's used to.

"Pleasant and very real, isn't it, Mrs. Farris?" he asks as if she already knows what this conversation is about, as if she has been participating in it from the very beginning.

She tries to prop herself up, but her arms are too frail. She looks at them, startled to see skin so wrinkled that it hangs loose over her bones. She can remember—vividly—how it feels to lever herself out of a swim-

ming pool using only her upper arm strength. But these arms have no strength. They look as if any sort of pressure on them will make them shatter like crystal.

"Mom?" Kimberly asks. "What do you think?"

Paula thinks she is having trouble remembering what any of this is about. She's been asleep, can't they tell that? And she isn't waking up well. But she's never woken up well, not like her own mother who was always cheerful in the mornings, only to have that cheer washed away as the pressures of the day overwhelmed her.

"Perhaps we should try again," the doctor says to Kimberly in a conspiratorial tone, as if Paula isn't even in the room. "Sometimes it takes two or three tries before the equipment works."

"If you think it's safe," Kimberly whispers. Paula has to strain to hear her. "My mother isn't usually this confused."

"It's safe," he says.

Then he steps closer to the bed.

"Mrs. Farris?" he says in that too-loud slightly baby-talk voice people use with the elderly. "We're going to send you under one more time. Is that all right with you? We want to make sure you enjoy the experience. After all, there's no point if you don't."

Paula frowns at this, remembering some vague discussion of a point. Some reason for the bed, the small room, her daughter's concern.

"Just do it," Kimberly whispers, and the so-called doctor touches a panel on the wall. The bed shivers, once, as if it is trying to find a way out of the room, and Paula Farris feels a chill run through her, a chill she can't abide. . . .

Gasoline runs up the plastic hose and into her mouth. She remembers to spit almost too late, the foul-tasting liquid stinging some cuts in her gums. She pulls the hose away from her lips, and gasoline spills across the gravel in front of her. Craig grabs the hose from her and sticks it into the open gas tank of his rusty Impala.

The hose goes all the way back to the Cadillac, which is parked in the hotel's lot at the very edge of the alley. Maybe the owner thought this part of the parking lot was safe.

Instead it's easy pickins. Craig says he hasn't bought gas for a month.

Paula's just glad he made her lean forward when he told her how to suck on that hose. Otherwise she would have been doused in gasoline. And with Craig's friend Johnny smoking not two yards away, being covered in gasoline is dangerous.

The fall night is ice-cold, more like December than early October. The weather forecast predicts snow by morning.

Paula gets up carefully, pretending that the gasoline hasn't fouled up the inside of her mouth. She wonders if she'll smell gas for the rest of the week. She won't be able to stand it.

She brushes gravel off the knees of her jeans, then walks over to the fourth member of their little party—Marilyn, who used to have the job of starting the pump, as Johnny called it. Marilyn is holding a bottle of scotch she stole from her parents' kitchen.

Paula takes the scotch, swigs it, using the alcohol to rinse out her mouth. Then she spits the liquid into the gravel.

"Hey!" Johnny says, flipping his still-lit cigarette toward the grass behind him. "That shit's expensive."

"Like you care," Paula says. Her tongue is numb. Talking feels weird.

"I care, man. I'd rather drink it than spit it out."

Paula meets his gaze, brings the bottle to her lips and takes another swig. He watches, frowning, as she sprays the alcohol toward him.

"Hey!" he says again. "Stop that."

"Just clearing out my mouth," she says. "Haven't girls done that around you before?"

"Not my problem that you had to prove you suck better than any other chick," he says, swiping the bottle from her. "You're nuts, you know that?"

She's nuts? She's not the one who drinks all the time. She only drinks when she's out with this crew, and only because there's nothing else to do. JP has invited her to spend nights at the movies or playing cards, but Paula needs something more than cards.

She and JP are starting to have a parting of the ways. JP is too young for her, even though they're the same age. JP believes in this town, believes she'll stay here forever; she wants the husband and 2.5 kids, and a house in the rich neighborhood.

Paula wants to get the hell out of here, and she still has three years to go before she gets her free pass. Graduation seems like forever from now.

But something's got to be better than this place. Or at least, different. And different is always better.

"Mom?" Kimberly's voice. She sounds concerned. "You all right?"

Paula opens her eyes. The room is the same. Maybe a bit smaller than it should be. All three of them seem crammed in here. Kimberly has moved up to Paula's side. Kimberly's hand is on her shoulder, resting gently, as if she's afraid she'll break her mother by touching her too hard.

The man with the clipboard still stands by the wall. He looks distracted, as if he's done this too many times.

But he's right. This time, she's come out clearer. This time, she remembers.

It's a dream, but not a dream. Her mouth still tastes ever so faintly of gasoline and alcohol. It's as if she's actually there, inside the memory, inside her fifteenth year, recorded detail for detail in the back of her brain—the parts they used to call unused when she was a girl, way back when.

Her eyes tear up, not because she's sad, but because she's tired. Kimberly wanted this to work so badly, and Paula doesn't want to tell her that it doesn't—at least, not in the way it's supposed to.

"Mom?"

"Give her a minute," the doctor—actually, he's an administrator, named . . . Ralph? Ray? Rudy? She still can't remember, probably because she never bothered to learn his name.

Somewhere, in the past ninety years, she's learned that some names aren't important, will never be important, and shouldn't be made important by committing them to memory. Rudy's or Roy's or Roger's is one of those.

She closes her eyes, not because she needs the rest, but because she

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needs a moment to think. New procedure, expensive treatment, a way of comfortably warehousing the very old. How does the slogan go? *When old age becomes irreversible, call us.*

Irreversible. The deterioration is inevitable. No matter what they've learned, all the secrets they've mastered, humans still can't stop growing old.

"Mom?"

Of course, Kimberly can't wait. Sixty years old, and she's never learned patience. Her generation might avoid the inevitability of age. They're working on it. Thanks to some expensive genetic repair, Kimberly has looked the same since she was forty-five.

Paula opens her eyes again, half expecting to see her daughter as a little girl, a baby really, with that expressive face, back when too-eager, too-intense was appropriate. Why hadn't they probed those memories?

And the answer comes as quickly as the question: because this is a free trial, and they haven't done a lot of prep. So many people hit their peak in high school that the free trial sends everyone back to those years, no questions asked.

"What did you think?" Kimberly asks.

She's going to have to answer. This is supposed to be a gift, a way of spending her declining years without misery, lost in a world of memories, re-experiencing them—literally—moment for moment. She agreed to it because she likes new experiences. She's frail and she is becoming a burden, not because she doesn't have the funds to take care of herself—she does—but because Kimberly actually has a sense of responsibility and feels she must take care of her mother.

And Paula doesn't have to go back to high school. She can pick the happiest decade of her life, and revisit it.

Ever since Kimberly proposed this, Paula wondered which decade that would be. Her twenties—poor, but striving, her body in the best shape ever? Her thirties—struggling, with a young daughter, a husband who leaves her after five years and a job she hates? Her forties—finally making enough to work fewer hours, only to monitor that daughter through a tough high school period? Or her fifties—alone for the first time in thirty years, trying to figure out how to live the rest of her life?

There is no happy decade. Just like there was no happy year. She has always believed the best was ahead of her.

Even now. Because there has to be something beyond this, right? And revisiting the memories is just a different kind of oblivion, same as taking tranquilizers or drinking too much or sleeping all the time.

She only has a decade or so left. Why would she want to avoid it? Maybe it'll be the best one.

"Mom, please," Kimberly says. "You're scaring me."

Roderick or Reggie or Ralph is watching Paula now too. She isn't reacting like everyone else. Most people like this. She's seen the testimonials. She's actually heard from some friends who went through the free trial, but couldn't afford the entire package. Everyone loves this idea.

Except her.

"Sorry," Paula says. "I guess I wasn't very happy in high school."

But she was. She was as happy as she could be, given who she was and where she was. She was looking forward, moving, constantly moving.

She was herself, even then.

Ryan/Rufus/Reuben is reminding her in that sing-song I-hate-old-people voice of his that she can go to any year, any decade, any time. She isn't really listening.

Instead, she's thinking of people she hasn't thought of in years: Marilyn, who got pregnant that winter and disappeared; Craig, who enlisted and became career military; JP, who died at thirty-six of breast cancer. Paula's lost track of them, just like she'll lose track of Richard/Roland/Ronald the minute she leaves this room.

Their lives intersect with hers ever so briefly, and they might be important for a few minutes, a few days, a few years. But only a handful of people are important forever.

Like Kimberly and her children, and now her children's children. How can Paula disappear into her past and not keep up with Kimberly? Tracking Kimberly has been an obsession for sixty years.

"She's not going to do this," Kimberly says in a resigned voice. There will be a fight when they get home. Kimberly will sulk—I'm doing this for you, Mother—and Paula will tell her, for the billionth time, to grow up.

But the ironic thing is that Kimberly is doing this for Paula. Kimberly believes that happiness can be permanent, forgetting that nothing is permanent, nothing at all.

Paula hasn't been able to teach her daughter that in sixty years; she doubts she'll be able to teach Kimberly about happiness in the next decade.

But she'll try.

Paula clutches her daughter's hand. "Thanks for understanding," she says.

But what she really means is *Thanks for knowing me well enough to refuse this for me, so I don't have to explain myself to this bit player in the history of my life.*

Kimberly smiles at her, but is clearly distracted, probably trying to figure out how to care for her mother now, now that the warehousing and oblivion options have just gone away. Paula is going to have to tell her, yet again, that it's Paula's choice. Paula's life.

Kimberly's not responsible for it.

Besides, Paula likes adventure. Kimberly never has. That's the difference between them, an essential difference. As Paula's own mother used to say, *How dull would life be if we were all the same?*

Or if we've lived it before and were only repeating, like television shows used to do in the summers when Paula was a child. Sometimes revisiting old favorites is fun—there are bits forgotten, moments not noticed the first time around—but mostly it's a method for killing time.

Killing time is so impractical. Unlike old friends and family, time never has the courtesy to remain dead.

"Let's go home," Paula says to Kimberly.

Kimberly nods and squeezes Paula's hand just tightly enough, then goes to talk to Raul/Rafe/Rene about transportation, and other matters, waivers to sign, promises already broken.

Paula eases herself up in this strange bed with its powers to probe the mind and activate memories that would best remain buried. It's time to get out of here, and go somewhere else.

To live those last few years, no matter what they bring.

To continue the adventure, all the way to its bitter end. ○

RAW

Daniel Grotta

Daniel Grotta wrote the first biography of J.R.R. Tolkien, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Architect of Middle Earth* (Running Press), twenty-nine years ago, and the book is still in print. Daniel is one of the country's best-known digital camera experts, and the author of over a thousand high-tech articles and reviews.

He's an ex-war correspondent, ex-investigative reporter, ex-photojournalist, ex-columnist, and ex-classical music critic. And yes, he shoots digitally almost exclusively in RAW mode. His latest book is *PC Magazine Guide to Digital Photography*.

Sometimes, especially late at night, I'll pull out and study the creased and crumpled inkjet print that has become my most prized possession. Except for this single photograph—which of course proves nothing, since to anyone but me, it is an ordinary side-by-side shot of an unidentified middle-aged woman—not a single shred of evidence remains to prove there ever had been a Brady camera, a company called PictureForm Technology, a scientist named Dr. Wu. Everyone involved has either died or disappeared, including my son Tom, whom I miss so much. I scan the Web daily, doing keyword searches for encounters or intersections with different dimensions and alternate worlds, no matter how outlandish or unbelievable. So far, I have found nothing substantive or significant, but I believe that someday, something will eventually turn up. I must, for I have nothing left but hope.

I know this sounds like the rants and ravings of a disturbed and demented mind. But believe me, it did happen. I live in constant fear that I, too, will simply vanish someday soon. That is why I'm anxious to write down my experience now, while the events are still relatively fresh in my mind—and before *they* find and silence me.

"Welcome to sunny California, Mr. Nelson. I trust your flight was pleasant."

Dr. Chow-lin Wu, CEO of a start-up high-tech company called PictureForm Technology, greeted me at the door with a big smile and firm handshake. About my age, in his late forties or early fifties, he was tall for a

Chinese man, and almost bald, with a small fringe of black-grey hair around his ears. Unlike most middle-aged technical-type Asians I have known, he did not wear glasses. He spoke with a distinctive, clipped accent, but had a superb command of the English language. Dr. Wu wore a white lab coat over faded jeans and a white T-shirt that had silkscreened on it *Tofu is a four-letter word*.

"Dave—just Dave," I corrected, as he led me into the half-finished lobby of the company's brand new, nearly completed Santa Clara headquarters. On the front desk sat a single sheet of paper and a pen. A non-disclosure agreement, of course. It was a standard boilerplate NDA, so I signed and dated it without another thought. In my line of work, NDAs come with the territory.

"Just a formality," Dr. Wu explained apologetically, although we both knew I would never have made it past the lobby if I hadn't agreed to its terms. He then led me through a labyrinth of office suites, research labs, and photographic studios—most still in various stages of construction—eventually ending up in a starkly white, bare-walled conference room. There were about a half-dozen execs and engineers around a large oval conference table, and in the middle was a canvas camera bag. From it Dr. Wu extracted a digital camera.

"Here's our baby," he beamed proudly as he carefully handed the device to me. "It's the first and only one so far, although we hope to ramp up production once we get a few minor bugs worked out. We call it the Brady—in homage to Civil War photographer Matthew Brady."

I should explain that I was a well-known professional photographer whose specialty was testing, analyzing, and evaluating digital cameras. Equipment manufacturers used to employ me to vet their prototypes—to see how they'd stack up against the competition. My reputation in the industry was so well established and respected that if I gave a camera a good score, they often used quotes from my report in their advertising and promotion.

Dr. Wu had hired me to put the Brady through its paces.

Frankly, I saw nothing new or noteworthy about the prototype to distinguish it from a half-dozen similar pro cameras. When I pointed this out to Dr. Wu, he smiled impishly and pulled out a non-working image sensor sample in a transparent Lucite box the size of a deck of playing cards. An image sensor is the heart and soul of any digital camera. The chip Dr. Wu handed to me was a 24x36mm semiconductor slab of silicon and rare earths, with hundreds of hair strand-thin gold data contacts sticking out from the top, bottom, and sides. What was visually different about the Brady's image sensor was its strange iridescence that changed colors every time it moved.

Then I endured an excruciatingly detailed and boring technical briefing about the chip and the camera, followed by a portfolio of sample images. Unfortunately, I remember relatively little of it, and because everything was all very proprietary stuff, I was not permitted to take notes, nor was I given a disc or hardcopy of the presentation.

"So what do you think of our Brady?" Dr. Wu asked pointedly. I was always loathe to give first impressions without testing, so I cautiously but

candidly responded that I didn't see any significant difference between PictureForm's camera and pro models from Nikon, Canon, Fujifilm, Foveon, Kodak, and other manufacturers.

Dr. Wu clapped his hands together and broke out into a broad smile. "Exactly! That's the point, Dave. We think the Brady will hold its own against the competition, performance and quality-wise. But do you recall what was different about the sample image sensor I showed you?"

"Its iridescence?" I ventured.

"Precisely. We've developed a truly revolutionary fabricating process that allows us to manufacture our ninety megapixel chip at almost half the cost." If this were true, then PictureForm Technology would have an important edge in the professional market because it could sell cameras cheaper than competing products.

Everything hinged on whether or not the Brady could shoot as fast and as well as other pro cameras. My job was to thoroughly test the camera, and, hopefully, confirm that it was every bit as good as the competition. PictureForm Technology was banking that my test results would give them the imprimatur, the ringing endorsement it needed to put the Brady into full production and profitability.

After a catered sushi lunch, Dr. Wu escorted me to my rented car in the just asphalted parking lot "Have fun, Dave," he told me as he handed me a retainer check and the camera bag with the Brady prototype inside. "Let me know as soon as you have some concrete results." We shook hands and said goodbye, and I drove back to San Francisco Airport.

That also was the last time I saw or spoke to Dr. Wu.

The Pocono Mountains house in northeastern Pennsylvania where I live has been in our family for five generations. In fact, my test lab is in the converted barn behind the house I grew up in. Despite being in the boonies, it's a state-of-the-art facility, as well equipped as any camera test lab in the world.

"So this is the Brady, Boss," Barry said as I handed him the camera. "Doesn't look like anything special."

My assistant Barry Logan was a large and lumbering, cheerful red-haired lad of twenty-three. A born-and-bred local like me, Barry had been shooting professionally since junior high school. He was a willing and competent extra pair of hands, someone who wasn't afraid of hard work and could put in long hours. Besides, he was pleasant company for someone like me who lived alone with only a pair of cats for companionship.

Barry fondled the Brady for a few minutes, feeling for and finding all the controls, removing and putting on the interchangeable lens, and then firing off a burst and viewing the images on the three-inch color plasma viewer on the back of the camera. "The usual tests, Boss?" Barry usually called me boss, I suppose, because I was his employer and more than twice his age, so he didn't feel comfortable calling me Dave, like everybody else in town. And he was just too informal a guy to keep calling me Mr. Nelson.

"The usual," I confirmed. This meant putting the Brady through a series of technical tests, followed by a photo shoot. That's the fun part of test-

ing—and the most significant, from the company's point of view—because it involves photographing real-life subjects with competing cameras, and then closely comparing image quality.

Barry and I spent four intense twelve-hour days putting the Brady through our battery of low level tests, including measuring and calculating resolution, pixel transition, noise, dynamic range, Nyquist frequency, and color aliasing. We then subjected the camera to a series of performance tests, including bootup, click-to-click recycling, and burst mode times, followed by battery life benchmarks. Our results were very similar to competing cameras.

Where the Brady clearly aced the competition was shooting in RAW mode. All pro cameras can shoot in one of three modes: JPEG, TIFF, or RAW. JPEG compresses the images, for faster throughput and conserving storage space on the camera's memory card. TIFF images are uncompressed, for better image quality, but take much longer to process and save, and take up more storage space in the camera. RAW is what most professional photographers use because it captures everything without processing or compression, yielding the highest image quality. But it's stored in a proprietary format unique to each manufacturer that requires post-processing in the computer rather than the camera, using the manufacturer's special software. The Brady's RAW mode file transfer and processing speeds were better and faster than any other camera I ever tested.

After we completed and compiled all the technical tests, it was time to take real-life pictures of people, landscapes, still life setups, sports scenes, and the like. The first subject I always shoot was only ten minutes away from my house, a small but highly photogenic waterfall that empties into the southern end of Lake Wallenpaupack. When I was a kid, it had been our favorite swimming hole, a roughly circular pool with ribbons of water cascading from an overhang of dramatic boulders. The best light is mid-morning, when it streaks in at an oblique angle through the hanging evergreen branches, creating rich, deep shadows and dazzling specular highlights that test the very limits of even the best camera's dynamic range.

Barry and I loaded our equipment into the Explorer and headed for the lake. As usual, we set up the tripod with its custom bracket that mounted four cameras—two closely side-by-side, and two bolted just underneath the other pair. Not that it mattered; the Brady was mounted on the upper left side. Then Barry attached the jury-rigged electronic cable release that could simultaneously trigger all four cameras, so the instant of capture was identical. Shooting all four cameras simultaneously, each having an identical lens and settings, allowed for direct image quality comparison. Of course, because each camera was positioned slightly differently, inches apart, there was a negligible amount of parallax. But to all but the expert eye, the focus, position, and exposure of shots taken by each of the four cameras would be identical.

This was the best way to produce direct image quality comparison photographs taken by the Brady and its three closest competitors.

It was a partly cloudy summer day, with dramatic fast-moving white and grey cumulus clouds hanging low in the sky. Conditions were so pho-

tographically perfect I decided we would use only natural light that morning, without reflectors or strobelights. Barry took a color temperature reading as well as an exposure reading, but left the final framing and focusing to me. Once everything was prepped, Barry switched each of the cameras into the Record mode. I picked up the electronic shutter release button with my right hand and waited for that moment, that second, that instant for a break in the clouds when the rays of sunlight were just perfect.

And that's when I was blasted by a proverbial bolt out of the blue.

When the lightning hit, I was instantly struck deaf, dumb, blind, and unconscious. I very briefly lit up like a Christmas tree, with a brilliant neon blue halo-like glow all around me, the cameras, and the tripod. I collapsed like a rag doll; I had stopped breathing; my heart had ceased beating; I was in fact clinically dead. Barry immediately whipped out his vid-phone (the watchphone on my wrist was fried), dialed 911, and called for an ambulance and paramedics. Then he began CPR on me. Damned if he didn't jump-start my heart by the time the ambulance arrived.

My son Tom was sitting by my hospital bed when I woke up a day later, with the worst headache of my life. In his mid-twenties, Tom is tall, dark, and muscular, exuding competence and confidence. Ever since the divorce, he has been the only family I have. Tom squeezed my hand reassuringly. He quickly filled me in with the details, including the bit about being clinically dead for several minutes.

"Did you see Grandma or Grandpa, or a tunnel of white light?" he jested, knowing I was a confirmed agnostic and avowed disbeliever in all things spiritual and occult. His interest in near-death experiences was both personal and professional, because Tom was a doctoral candidate at Columbia University, and a clinical psychologist at Bellevue in New York City whose private field of study is parapsychology. Over the years, we had had many spirited disagreements on the subject.

"Nary a thing," I responded weakly, trying my best to smile. "The very last thing I remember was shooting the damned waterfall." It drained almost all my already depleted energy to speak just those few words. Besides, talking about family is a sore subject with me.

A few minutes later, the doctor appeared and shooed Tom away. Except for my pounding, throbbing head and the strange but painless watchphone silhouette permanently etched on my wrist, I was essentially unharmed. But she strongly suggested I remain there one more night, just in case. I felt like death warmed over, and my medical insurance was footing the entire bill, so I readily agreed.

"Good to see you back in one piece, Boss. Hello, Tom," Barry chirped as Tom and I walked into the studio the next afternoon. Tom had stayed the night in his old bedroom, and driven me home from the hospital the next morning. Since it was Saturday, he offered to remain through the weekend, a welcome guest. I now deeply regret that although his apartment was only two hours away in Manhattan, I didn't spend as much time with Tom as I once could have.

"So what's the damage?" I asked Barry, pointing to the four cameras sitting on the workbench.

"Well, Boss," Barry said, sounding strangely and uncharacteristically serious and somber, "there's good news and there's bad news, and good and bad news. Which do you want to hear first?"

"Let's have the bad news first." I hated it whenever Barry pulled the good news/bad news routine, but it had become something of a running joke for the two years he had been working for me.

"The Fuji's toast." Barry picked up the first camera and tossed it over to me. Although his throw was perfect, over a distance of only about five feet, I was so weak I almost dropped the four-pound device onto the studio floor. Not that it would have mattered, because the camera looked as if it had been through a blast furnace. The white-painted lettering on the pentaprism was totally gone, the black magnesium body was scorched and buckled, and the lens cracked completely through. It was an unsalvageable doorstopper. I wasn't overly concerned, however. It was, after all, insured, and because it had been destroyed on their time, I would even get PictureForm Technology to pick up all of the deductible. A phone call to Alex Gann at Fuji, and I'd have a new replacement overnighted to me.

"Now here's the good news," Barry continued, picking up both the Foveon and the Kodak from the counter. "Not a scratch on them." I passed the Fuji to Tom without comment, and carefully grasped the other cameras, one in each hand. They appeared to be intact. Rather than try each of them out, I took Barry at his word that they were working perfectly. I returned them to Barry, and he laid them gently back onto the counter.

"And here's the good news/bad news, Boss," Barry said as he slowly handed me the Brady. I was both concerned and apprehensive, because Dr. Wu had stressed that it was, so far, the only prototype in existence. At first inspection, it appeared to be unaffected by the lightning strike. Hesitantly, I turned the power switch on, pointed the camera at Tom, and pressed the shutter button. The Brady immediately responded with a rapid, normal-sounding *click / click / click / click / click / click / click*.

So far, so good.

I quickly flipped from Record to Playback mode, and paged through the just-shot images as they appeared on the camera's plasma viewfinder, one after another. At first glance, all the thumbnails looked good for having just captured them in pure point-and-shoot mode, without checking focus, framing, or exposure.

"So what should I be looking for?" I asked Barry.

"You won't see it in the camera, Boss," Barry explained as he gently relieved me of the Brady. "It shoots perfect TIFFs and JPEGs, 100 percent of the time."

"So the problem is with RAW?"

"*Bingo, you got it!*" Barry replied. I couldn't tell if he were being sarcastic or simply playful. Or maybe something else. He didn't sound his normal self, however.

I checked the metadata readout on the image I had just been perusing, to double check that the capture mode had been set to RAW.

We moved to the long workbench along the studio wall, where our four

multi-processor workstations were spaced every four feet. We sat down on the pneumatically operated padded stools in front of a wall screen. Barry placed the Brady close to the wireless black pyramid interface, and it began automatically uploading RAW files directly into Photoshop 16 and displaying them on the large plasma screen in front of us.

We watched the just-shot images slowly cascade open, one by one. I had fired off about twelve frames altogether, so I figured that it would take approximately thirty seconds, all told, for them to finish uploading. But being RAW files—i.e., a simple dump of unprocessed data read directly from the image sensor—they must be processed in the computer with PictureForm Technology's software. So, it took an additional twenty-five to thirty seconds for each image to open on the screen. They looked perfectly normal to me.

Barry waited a few seconds, until the last frame popped up onto the screen. "I think something got very screwed up inside the camera, you know, from the lightning strike. Let me show you what I mean." He leaned his long arm over to the graphics tablet and, with stylus in hand, began drawing a series of rapid, fluid moves that looked so easy, but were in fact honed through literally thousands of hours of experience.

First, Barry selected a single image—a slightly skewed shot of Tom brushing a lock of his hair out of his eye, with the front wall of the studio in the background. Then he clicked on the Select tool, drew a rectangle around the upper section of the image, cropping Tom out of the picture entirely. Only the large window on the wall showed, the one that looked directly onto my house, about a hundred feet away. Next, Barry picked the Magnifier tool, put it over the image, and zoomed up another 300 percent. Now only the four upper window panes filled the screen. He then used the Gamma Curve dialog to strengthen the midtones so we could see my house more clearly through the panes. A large, rambling 150-year-old, three-story Victorian in fairly good condition, it had a peaked slate roof, large hatched windows with black shutters, white vinyl siding, and an open wraparound porch with white-painted wooden rails. Equidistant between the house and the barn was a tall, gnarled, twisted centuries-old oak tree, more dead than alive.

"Now watch this," Barry said as he brought up the Alpha Channel window and positioned it next to the original image. The Alpha, or Luminance Channel, is an overlay where one can add, subtract, or edit any number of elements and superimpose them on top of each other to create a composite photo image. As expected, the Alpha Channel window we were looking at was a uniform black, because its default opacity was set at 100 percent. In other words, no pixels (the millions of tiny color dots that combine to make up pictures, and everything else you see on a computer screen) were showing through. Barry glanced over at me, to be sure I was watching closely, put the stylus on the Opacity slider, and slowly moved his arm. The black transitioned into grey, and gradually began to show the outline of the house. As more pixels were activated, my house took on greater substance and eventually color. Barry then quickly moved the slider up all the way, displaying a full color image of the house. It should have been absolutely identical to the original captured image.

Only, the tree wasn't there in the yard.

I did a *say what?* double take as I leaned into the bench and squinted carefully at the image of my house in the Alpha Channel window. Not only was the tree completely gone, the wraparound porch was now fully enclosed with glass panes. What's more, all the black shutters were painted green.

"How'd he do that, Dad?" Tom asked me as he rapidly moved his head from side to side and back again, like a spectator watching a tennis match, comparing the larger window view of the original picture to the smaller Alpha Channel image.

"Damned if I know," I answered. I honestly had no idea. Of course, the color of the shutters could have been a simple computer error in color processing, but there was no optical aberration or image artifact I had ever seen or heard of that could account for the missing tree and the remodeled porch.

So far as I knew, there were only three possible explanations: (1) Barry was playing a practical joke on me; (2) the camera's I/O was picking up and displaying stray signals; (3) or somehow, there was a leftover ghost image in the memory card. I immediately eliminated deliberate trickery. Although Barry was technically capable of manufacturing a treeless yard and remodeled porch, he simply didn't have the temperament for it.

"Did you disable the I/O?" I asked. It was the most obvious explanation. Every pro camera has both a built-in wireless interface and a broadband modem, to upload images to a nearby computer or vidphone. Conversely, images can also be *downloaded*, from the same sources. Normally, you have to switch on one or the other I/O—Input/Output—ports. But the lightning strike could have zapped the switch, so it was on intermittent or even continuous input.

"Yup. I even sicced an electronic sniffer on it, just in case the switch was fried. Nothing." Barry shook his head slowly.

"What about ghosting?" I asked Barry. Ghosting, the electronic equivalent of a film double exposure, once was a common problem in the early years of digital photography. But the technology has improved so much that it's virtually unheard of in this day and age.

"Second thing I thought of, Boss," Barry responded. "I flushed the buffers on the camera, and even pulled the battery out for thirty seconds, to drain the power completely. Then I swapped out the memory card for a fresh one, shot the scene again, but the results were the same.

"Nope, it sure isn't ghosting," Barry summed up.

Tom seemed merely curious at this anomaly, expecting that there had to be some technical explanation for the phenomenon. I looked over at Barry, who was doing his level best avoiding making eye contact with me. He was genuinely perplexed, even a little scared, waiting for me to tell him what went wrong, and how were we going to fix it.

"This only happens with RAW files?" I asked.

"Yup."

"Every time?"

"Yup. Whatever I shot, the image in the Alpha Channel was different from the main image. I took a bunch of pictures around the studio, and what came up were images of an old, empty barn. I took shots of my pick-

up in the driveway, and all I saw was gravel. I took a picture of myself in the mirror, but like a vampire, there wasn't any reflection. There wasn't even any goddamn mirror."

"But the images were all correct in the active window?"

"Yup."

"You saw these . . . different images only in the Alpha Channel window?"

"Yup."

"Did you save the images?"

"Yup. I also saved screen captures of the Alpha Channel images."

Barry had done exactly what I would have done, to the letter. Nevertheless, without saying another word, I grabbed the Brady, opened the memory card drawer, took out a memory card, and walked outside. Both Tom and Barry followed at my heels. I panned around the yard, clicking away at nothing in particular. I shot the lawn, the studio, the old tree. I shot Tom, his red Honda, Barry's blue Dodge Charger truck. I walked around the yard, taking picture after picture until, finally, a red light flashed in the viewfinder: MEMORY CARD FULL.

"Here you go," I said, pulling out the postage stamp-sized memory card and tossing it to Barry, who then uploaded all the images into the computer. I felt extremely uncomfortable as I waited for the images to appear on the screen, fighting a rising sense of irritable, irrational nervousness. As before, the images eventually cascaded one by one as they opened.

"Go ahead, let's look at the Alpha Channel," I said.

Barry leaned intently toward the huge screen as he clicked on the first image, a nothing photo of the yard and driveway. It was very similar in the Alpha Channel window, except the front view of Tom's red Honda had been replaced by the back end of a black Chevy Suburban.

There was no Suburban in my driveway.

"Next," I ordered.

Barry swapped images, to a shot of the side of the house. In the Alpha Channel, the image was virtually identical to reality, except the shutters were green rather than black, the curtains frilly white rather than plain grey, and purple irises were blooming alongside instead of my trellis of deer-chomped rose bushes.

"Next."

This time, the main picture was a direct shot of the oak tree, from a distance of about fifteen feet. It was gone entirely from the Alpha Channel image, revealing the house in the background. At the extreme edge of the frame was the head of a large chocolate-colored Labrador with a maroon leather collar.

I don't have a dog. No dog had been in the yard when I was shooting.

"Next."

This was a shot of the tree trunk, taken on the fly from a slightly different angle. But in the Alpha Channel, instead of the tree, a rapidly approaching dog filled part of the frame. The animal seemed to be headed straight for the camera.

"Next."

Barry hesitated, glared at me for a second, and then did as ordered. On

the main monitor, we could see that the camera angle had moved from shooting the tree back toward the driveway. But in the Alpha Channel, the smiling, slobbering face of that friendly looking pooch filled almost the entire frame. He was staring directly at the lens.

"Next, please."

Another picture of the tree, but in the Alpha Channel, a dark blur covered most of the frame. It took me a few seconds before I figured out that it was—believe it or not!—our phantom dog's tongue licking the camera lens (or whatever it was he saw). This was clearly impossible—as impossible as everything else that was being captured in the Alpha Channel.

"This is too weird," Barry grumbled, almost inaudibly. "Too fucking weird for me. It's just not natural, not Christian."

I was stunned at Barry's reaction. As far as I could recall, this was a first: he never complained, and he never, ever used foul language. Barry was a devout, church-going Catholic. He once confided that he had considered becoming a priest, but finally decided against it because his girlfriend (whom he later married) said she didn't think she could hack it as a priest's wife. Barry and I occasionally joked about the faith thing, about his being a True Believer and me the quintessential agnostic, a secular humanist. Now that I think back on it, I recall more than a hint of hard-edged disapproval in his comments and responses.

"Just move on, and cut the editorial comment." I didn't disguise my anger. Tom gently laid his hand on my forearm and looked at me with raised eyebrows, as if to say "chill out, or you're going to have a revolt soon." So I chilled.

In quick succession, Barry paged through the next three dozen or so pictures. The images in the active window were those I had just shot: of the house, the studio, the yard, the driveway, the cars. But in the Alpha Channel, almost all the images were of the chocolate Lab's face. Obviously, wherever the dog was, it could detect the Brady every time I fired off a frame. That the dog was sometimes to the left or right, or several feet or yards away, seemed to indicate that the phenomenon, however it was manifest, was not continuous, but only when I was actually taking an image. Whether it was seeing me, the camera, a colored flash of light, or maybe hearing some sort of audible click or chirp, I had no way of telling. But since many of the shots were of its open mouth, I assumed it was barking its doggie head off.

That theory was confirmed in the next sequence of shots. Although the dog continued to dominate the frames, we could see, in the background, the figure of a woman emerging, frame by frame, from the front porch door. The woman appeared to be in her early fifties, but still shapely and somewhat attractive. Her face was thinly chiseled with high cheekbones and small lips, and sun-tanned skin just beginning to show spiderwebs of age. She was wearing gold-rimmed eyeglasses. Her fly-away, shoulder-length black hair was peppered with white strands, and her hands were elegantly long but criss-crossed with prominent veins. She was wearing a tailored yellow blouse with the top two buttons undone, and a wide blue denim skirt that extended almost down to her ankles.

The woman walked directly toward the dog. It appeared that she too

noticed whatever phenomenon the Brady was producing, because she changed direction to approach it. Barry brought up on an Alpha Channel frame that had her looking directly into the lens, almost as if she were sitting for a portrait. She was staring straight at me.

"Hold it there!" I barked at Barry. "Do a screen capture and bring it into the active window!"

In quick order, Barry windowed on the face and then captured and automatically saved it. He zoomed up the woman's face to several times life size, revealing practically every curve, line, pore, texture, bump, and blemish.

She was beautiful.

Somehow, she looked familiar. . . . *No, it wasn't possible!* My mouth must have dropped in stunned surprise as I silently stared at the face.

"You look like you've seen a ghost, Dad," Tom said as he too studied the magnified face. At that, I instantly did a one-eighty and jogged toward the house. I took the stairs two at a time, to the attic above the third floor. It had been many months since I had last been in the attic, but I knew exactly where the old-fashioned, wooden-hooped trunk was. I quickly opened the curved lid, and reached directly for a stiff, discolored manila folder with a red ribbon tied around it. Inside, the photograph was sitting on top, right where I knew it would be.

I closed the lid and hurriedly returned to the studio, to the flatbed scanner on the counter next to Barry. I bumped him out of the way and grabbed the stylus from his unresisting hand. Then I carefully positioned the photo onto the scanner glass platen, closed the lid, and scanned it in. The color snapshot quickly displayed on the wall screen. It was a shot of two smiling, sunburned kids, a boy of almost twelve and a sixteen-year-old girl, standing rigidly at a lakeside dock. In the background was an eight-foot green Sunfish, mast raised and the rainbow-colored sail unfurled. Without missing a beat, I switched to the Crop tool, and cut everything but the girl's face out of the picture. I then switched to the Magnifier tool and clicked on her face, over and over, until I had zoomed it up to fill the entire window. In Levels, I dropped some of the red sunburn out, bringing her skin tone back to normal. I tiled the picture and placed it next to the window with the middle-aged woman from the Alpha Channel.

Still in Photoshop, I pulled down Identikit, an Internet-distributed freeware plug-in almost every computer owner receives from the I-forget-its-name foundation that posts the pictures that appear on milk cartons and supermarket bulletin boards. You know, the ones that ask *"Have you seen this child? She would look like this today."* It's a simple morphing program similar to more sophisticated ones used by the F.B.I., for identifying missing children years after they had disappeared. I moved the slider underneath the photograph, changing the setting from its default of Age Six up to Age Fifty, and then clicked the Execute command. The picture of the teenage girl instantly aged four decades.

Except for the eyeglasses, the two side-by-side images were absolutely identical. There was no doubt whatever that it was the same woman.

My sister Alice.

* * *

"Who is she, Dad?" Tom asked as he peered intently over my shoulder as I hit the PRINT button to make a few hardcopies. I grabbed the first one off the printer, looked at it intently, folded it and stuffed it in my back pocket. My son seemed mesmerized by all this, not understanding a third of what was going on. On the other hand, Barry was becoming restless, agitated—and surly. I couldn't deal very well with Barry's *prima donna* moodiness, so I shot him a shut-up-or-get-out-of-here glance.

"It is my sister, Alice," I replied, very quietly, very calmly. However, I was shaking when I said it, as the magnitude of it all was just beginning to sink in.

Tom looked at me with raised eyebrows. "You never told me you had a sister!"

"That's because she died when I was twelve."

Barry loudly slammed his palm down onto the counter; the crack sounded like a rifle shot. His face was red with anger (or was it fright?) as he looked right at me. "OK, *that's it, Mr. Nelson! No fucking way I'm photographing fucking ghosts! I'm outta here!*" Barry sprung up from the stool, and—so help me God!—crossed himself ostentatiously, and then spat on the floor. It was like something from an old Bela Lugosi movie. After that he stormed out of the studio. Half a minute later, his pickup spun gravel and was gone.

Frankly, I couldn't blame Barry all that much. This was very, very scary stuff, and I was more than a little frightened myself. Forty-nine years of smug disbelief had just gone completely out the window.

"As a matter of fact, Tom," I went on, ignoring Barry's dramatic exit, "your grandmother took this picture of us at the lake less than an hour before Alice drowned."

Scary, scary stuff indeed. In my mind's eye, I replayed, as I have literally thousands of times over the past thirty-seven years, the sudden squall that came up just as Alice and I sailed past White Beauty Point. A violent gust of wind overturned the little Sunfish before we could drop sail, dumping both of us into the whitecapped water. Although it was supposed to be unsinkable, the Sunfish quickly disappeared beneath the waves, without a trace. Alice and I were both good swimmers and were wearing safety vests, but the seemingly endless undulations of six-foot waves broke over our heads, one after another. Even though our life jackets kept the upper part of our bodies afloat, the waves kept rolling over our heads, drowning us. In desperation, Alice struggled out of her life jacket and, with one hand gripping me tightly, buckled her loose vest to mine. Then she let go, and was immediately pulled under by a large wave.

I hadn't even had a chance to say goodbye, or to thank her for saving my life.

The extra buoyancy propped my head above the waves just far enough that I could breathe, until the storm blew over. Rescue divers found Alice's body some hours later, at sunset, the saddest day of my life. What I didn't tell Tom was that I had never, ever spoken about Alice, or even mentioned her name since then. Except in my memory, I had gone into permanent denial, completely shutting out all public acknowledgment of Alice's existence.

Tears were streaming down my cheeks as I continued to stare at the two photographs of Alice on the monitor. I was so stunned I didn't know what to say, what to do.

"*This is wonderful, Dad!*" Tom said, enthusiastically. "*Truly, truly wonderful!*" I didn't know if his joy was from having his belief in the hereafter so graphically confirmed, in learning that he had an aunt who still existed on some other plane or dimension, or happy for me that my inconsolable loss had become my unbounded gain. "The next step is to figure out how to communicate with this other world."

Tom's decisive confidence helped snap me out of my momentary despair, by giving me a clear-cut problem that called for a technically feasible solution. Obviously, the damaged Brady was capable of creating some sort of physical impact on the other world that could be seen, heard, or both by Alice and her dog. It had definitely attracted and held their attention, so long as I kept shooting. If I could—

Eureka!

I had been idly drumming on the counter over the past twenty minutes, a nervous habit that echoed way back to my Boy Scout days. My first merit badge on the path to a failed Eagle Scout status (I dropped out right after Alice had drowned) had been for learning Morse Code. I was so successful in committing the entire alphabet to memory that even today, whenever I am nervous, I unconsciously drum out, with two fingers of my left hand, A-B-C-D-E-F, and so on, in sequence all the way through Z—over and over again. Ironically, it had been Alice who had helped me master Morse Code, by drilling me for hours on end.

By varying the timing of when I pressed the camera shutter, I could send out a stream of Morse to Alice!

"I've got it, Tom!" I announced proudly, wiping the tears away with my shirt sleeve. Instantly, my mood had changed from fear and remorse to unbridled, upbeat optimism. "Over there in the corner, grab that tripod and follow me."

"What are we doing, Dad?"

"Hunting," I answered, as I led him into the yard. "Hunting, son."

We had a couple of things, none serious, going against us. Because we could make contact with this other world only by capturing RAW images and viewing them in the Alpha Channel, it would be impossible to conduct communications in real time. Alice and her dog had surely moved on in the hour or so that had passed since I had taken the shots in the yard. I had to set the Brady up someplace where she would see it. I then needed to compose a message that would catch her attention. Of course, I was assuming Alice would still remember Morse Code. But then, it's like getting back on the proverbial bicycle. . . .

My plan was simple. I would walk around the house, shooting off the Brady, until I located Alice. Then I would set the Brady up on a stationary tripod and use a wireless remote control to send out a stream of Morse from it. Alice could respond either by typing on a computer where I could read the text on her monitor, or by writing on paper and simply holding it up for me to see. I would photograph what she said, transmit it wireless-

ly back to the studio, download and process it in Photoshop, and view it in the Alpha Channel. Writing a simple macro—a small subroutine—would automatically upload and process RAW files, and do screen captures of the Alpha Channel. By networking it to the house computer, I could display them on any one of the smaller monitors hanging on the walls in various rooms.

With Tom in tow, I first went into the most used room in the house: the kitchen.

"Put it down over there," I motioned to Tom, indicating that he should temporarily place the tripod by the refrigerator. After setting the Brady in position, I sat down at the kitchen table and reached for the wireless computer keyboard and mouse hanging up next to the sink. With a few quick strokes, I logged onto the studio network and brought up Photoshop. It took me the better part of ten minutes to write and debug a crude macro that automated the capture-and-display sequence.

With the remote, the mouse, and the keyboard at hand, I could now operate everything while sitting at the table and eating a chicken sandwich. And that's exactly what I did. I pressed the shutter twice, and waited about thirty-five seconds until the first picture popped up on the kitchen wall monitor. Alice had modernized her kitchen quite differently from the remodeling my ex- did the year after Tom was born. Like me, Alice had retained Grandma Nelson's antique oak kitchen table and matching chairs as its centerpiece, but they had been professionally refinished and polyurethaned. Instead of lilac pattern wallpaper, she had painted the walls bright yellow, as well as hung a few bird prints for decoration. The half-century-old white enamel gas stove in the corner had been replaced with stainless steel electric burners mounted into a speckled white and black granite-topped island counter, with a large restaurant-style overhead rack from which hung a dozen designer pots and pans. Rather than the side-by-side white refrigerator/freezer I had installed last year, in her kitchen sat a single-door stainless steel refrigerator in the same exact spot.

But no Alice.

"What now, Dad?" Tom asked as he wolfed down the remnants of last week's blueberry pie.

"I'm going to wander around a bit. Yell out when you see your aunt on the monitor." It sounded strange, calling Alice an aunt, as if she had been a regular part of our family for years. I removed the Brady from the tripod, and slowly strolled through the hallway and through the living room, pointing and pressing the shutter every few seconds. Then, I went into the study.

After what seemed like halfway forever, the Alpha Channel image of the room popped up on the study's wall monitor. Alice was sitting in the corner at Dad's old roll-top desk, staring intently at an ancient IBM laptop. Lying at her feet was the chocolate Lab.

"*She's here!*" Tom yelled loudly, unnecessarily. By the time the third image cascaded onto the wall screen, the dog had abruptly left its resting spot and appeared to be lunging at the camera lens. Alice had turned around and was looking at the lens, too. She sat there calmly, with her

arm casually draped over the chair back, almost as if she were expecting to receive some sort of message.

I then took a breath, gripped the camera tightly, and began pressing the shutter in a staggered staccato rhythm.

Click / click / click. Pause. Click click click. Pause. Click / click / click.

I repeated this sequence three times. What I was tapping out with the shutter was the long obsolete, but once universal distress code: *SOS*. If anything would get Alice's attention and alert her that a message was being sent to her in Morse, this would be it.

D-o y-o-u u-n-d-e-r-s-t-a-n-d-? I tapped out by pressing the shutter button. *H-o-l-d u-p y-o-u-r l-e-f-t h-a-n-d i-f y-o-u d-o.* The images of Alice and her dog began overlaying one after another on the monitor. It was frustrating having to wait nearly a minute before I could receive visual confirmation that Alice understood. In the meanwhile, Tom had come into the study and stood beside me, placing his right hand on my shoulder. It felt reassuring.

Tom had never been a scout, and I doubted he had even heard of Morse Code, since it had been replaced by digital communications when he was a mere infant.

"Look at her left arm," I alerted him. I don't know why, but I wanted it to be a surprise to my son.

Seconds later, we began to see the frame-by-frame sequence of Alice, still sitting, assertively raising her left hand in the air, holding her elbow with her right hand as if she were a second grade student asking the teacher if she could go to the bathroom. Her facial expression seemed to show she was perplexed, curious.

"*Bingo!*" I shouted in triumph. It had been nearly four decades since I had last seen or spoken with my older sister Alice, and now, here she was, alive and well, so very close but impossibly far away.

"How did you do that, Dad?" Tom asked, amazed. "How did you know?"

"Magic," I responded cryptically. "Watch this."

I began pressing the shutter at an ever increasing speed. Rusty as I was, my confidence was growing by the minute, so much so that I felt capable of transmitting twenty to twenty-five words a minute. That's not nearly as fast as I could Morse at age twelve, but hey, it was pretty good for a skill I hadn't practiced in many, many years, other than my nervous, mindless alphabet tapping.

Alice, I Morsed, I am communicating from very far away. I will shortly explain who I am. If you understand. . . In red letters, the words *MEMORY CARD FULL* flashed in the Brady's viewfinder. I quickly reformatted the card and continued signaling.

"Morse Code, right?" Tom correctly guessed. His eyes continued to be glued to the wall monitor, not to me or the Brady. "I didn't know you knew Morse Code."

You can communicate with me by typing on your laptop, I tapped. *It will take me a few minutes to set up.* I sent Tom to get the tripod and remote from the kitchen, and then I began reprogramming the Brady's Setup options so the datastream went directly into the computer rather than saving to the memory card. That would prevent any more *MEMORY CARD FULL* messages.

Alice had filled her laptop screen with thirty-six-point text by the time I had set up the tripod. With the remote in hand, I took a single shot, waited for the Alpha Channel to open on the wall screen, and then zoomed in so I could read it without putting on my eyeglasses.

The screen read: *Who are you? Where are you? Are you from another time/space continuum?*

I was surprised by the question. It implied that she knew far more than I about physics and, somehow, already suspected that the message was coming from outside her ordinary universe. Panning around the image, I scanned the titles on Alice's bookshelves and saw that most of her books were on the physical sciences, such as *Strings and Superstrings*, *Gravity and Temporal Distortions*, *Super Atoms and Bose-Einstein Condensates*, *Heisenberg's Uncertainty Versus Schrödinger's Cat*, *Zero Point Vacuum Fluctuations*, *Time and Space Confluence and Conversion*. Since she seemed well versed in quantum theory and all it implied, it wasn't a giant leap of logic for her to conclude that the anomaly the Brady was producing could be coming from another dimension or universe.

Please describe what effect you are seeing or hearing every time I transmit to you, I tapped out.

After a minute's wait, we could see Alice turn her back to us and resume typing on her laptop. When she had finished, she turned around, looked straight into the camera, and held her right thumb up.

The phenomenon you are producing is purely visual. It's difficult to describe, but it looks like a hologram gone mad. For about a half-second, a rectangle of approximately twenty-five by thirty-five centimeters dramatically distorts. The clear air flashes into what looks like a long tunnel, and in it I can see my house, barn, and garden, and sometimes, one or two young men. I also see cars that aren't here, a tree that was cut down thirty years ago, the old porch before I enclosed it. Despite the brevity of the images, I know that it is not possible that these scenes are from my world.

Wow! I had completely forgotten that the Brady was primarily photographing my world, and only incidentally captured images from another universe or dimension. Apparently, the camera was making some sort of ripple through adjoining realities, and Alice was seeing my reality (or a reflection of it) every time the Brady took a picture. Could that be an unintended byproduct of Dr. Wu's revolutionary chip fabricating process, activated only when struck by lightning? Would it be possible that, by altering the intensity or duration of the lightning strike, the Brady could somehow photograph additional realities? Or was there only one alternative universe? Intriguing questions, something that I desperately wanted to ask Dr. Wu. But right then, my sole interest was in reaching out to my sister.

Alice, I tapped, do you remember a spring afternoon many years ago, when you were supposed to be bicycling to the library to meet your friend Martha but instead went with your brother Davie to the pond near Old Man Harris's hunting lodge? It was hot and you wanted to go swimming, only, you forgot to bring bathing suits, so you skinny-dipped instead? And that you saw Davie's erection when you both stripped? Do you remember? It was the first time I had seen Alice completely unclothed, and the sight

of her lovely teenage body had given me an erection. Alice stared at it and smiled, until I blushed and ran into the water. She told me that mine was the first one she had seen. We swore to each other we would never tell anyone about swimming naked that afternoon. And until now, I hadn't.

Who are you???? How do you know this???? I never told another soul about that day. And how do you know about my brother Davie? He died nearly forty years ago.

Although I had suspected as much, seeing those words sent a cold chill down my spine. If reality is the perception of events as they unfold or occur over time, then a logical point of departure between Alice's and my concurrent realities undoubtedly was the storm on the lake. In her reality, it was I who had died. Somehow, perhaps, those key moments in one's life, where reality is, paradoxically, strongest and weakest, are the nexus points that create and maintain a filament, a link closest to you. Do you know what I mean? I'm not a scientist or a philosopher, so the concept of infinite worlds and alternative realities that spin off, perhaps every microsecond, is difficult for me to accept. It's easier to believe that life's most important could-have-beens are resolved, or at least played out sometime or someplace else. And that they are so near and yet so far away as to be invisible and undetectable under most circumstances.

"What did you say to her, Dad?" Tom insisted. "She thinks you're the one who died."

"I reminded her about the time we went skinny-dipping," I answered without elaborating further, glad that Tom didn't understand Morse Code. Otherwise, I would have a lot to answer to my own personal Dr. Freud on his couch. "It will make it easier to explain that in this reality, I lived and she died."

I shot off a couple of frames, to see what Alice was up to. She was still typing on her laptop.

Tell me: what was the name of the little animal I had, where did I keep it, and what happened to it? Ahhhh, Alice was coming around to the possibility that it was I, her younger—dead—brother Davie, who was communicating with her.

Without any hesitation, I Morsed, *his name was Alvin, he was a chipmunk, you kept him in a ramshackle chicken wire coop near the old well, and he ran away when Davie took him out of the cage to play with him. You were so angry that you smacked your brother hard on the cheek when he told you. You made him cry. Mom punished you by forbidding you to watch television for a week.*

"Alice is testing me," I explained to my son. "I think she suspects that it's me, and wants to make certain before asking."

Who are you?

You know, Alice.

Yes, I suppose that I do, though it's impossible. Nevertheless, please tell me who you are.

I am David Roger Nelson, I was born October 12, 1965. My sister Alice drowned July 3rd, 1977, during a storm in Lake Wallenpaupack. I am a professional photographer, divorced, with one grown son. I converted great-great-grandpa's barn into my studio. The young men you saw are my

assistant Barry, who quit when I began taking pictures of my dead sister with a special experimental camera, and my son Tom, a graduate student in psychology at Columbia University.

This time, I spelled out every word to Tom as I Morsed it on the camera shutter.

Alice responded in kind. *I am Alice Elaine Nelson Morgan, recently widowed with two grown daughters. My dog's name is Woofy. I teach physics at Lackawanna Junior College. My brother Davie drowned July 3rd, 1977, saving my life by putting his life jacket on me. Our worlds split apart at that time, I think. How did you know about my world? What marvelous technology are you using to reach me? Why can't we communicate directly, in real time?*

All valid, direct, unemotional statements of fact and questions of science. This wasn't quite the quirky, mischievous, fun-loving Alice I remembered. This Alice was more somber and serious, more matter-of-fact and emotionally detached. But then, a lot happens in thirty-seven years. People change. Perhaps my death in her time/space continuum had sobered her personality, just as hers had driven me into a private shell from which I seldom emerged.

Over the next three hours, I explained to Alice about my being struck by lightning, the Brady, and the serendipity of discovering that together they had opened a heretofore unsuspected portal to each other's realities. And that so far as I was aware, this was the first time in history anyone had been able to breach this threshold. We talked and talked and talked (metaphorically speaking, of course, since we had no audio exchange), about our lives and children (and Alice's two grandchildren!), triumphs and disappointments, mutual friends and neighbors. Try as we did, we could discover no obvious historical or political differences between our respective worlds. Both our realities saw American-involved wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Syria, Guatemala, and the Philippines; the Dow-Jones passing 16,000, only to nosedive to 9900 in less than three weeks after a suicide terrorist detonated a suitcase-sized atomic device in Tel Aviv; the Ross Ice Shelf in Antarctica beginning to slide off the continent (though some corporations and politicians still denied the reality of global warming); the retirement age being raised to seventy in exchange for the national health insurance bill that was signed into law by President Hillary Clinton last year.

Sometime during that exchange, I realized how unfair it was that I could see Alice and she couldn't see me. So, I stepped in front of the camera as we talked.

You look like Dad, Davie. . . . So handsome. . . . I've missed you. That one image of her showed tears forming in her warm dark eyes, but they quickly disappeared, replaced by a bright, shining and very lively expression. Everything was just too exciting to waste time on tears, which, for that short moment in our lives, we both thought were finally part of the past. Here we were, brother and sister, family once more, and it felt great.

Afternoon drifted into evening and then night. Eventually, my finger became tired and sore from non-stop Morsing. Tom had dozed off and was snoring lightly. As much as I was reluctant to do so, I had to get some

sleep. Besides, the low battery warning on the Brady began to flash. I had never expected to be using the camera non-stop this long, and hadn't bothered to bring the AC adapter from the studio.

Time to call it a night, I Morsed.

Where do we go from here?

I don't know, Alice. I just know that I can't lose you again.

Me, too, Davie.

Good night, Alice. Talk to you tomorrow morning. By the way, I love you.

I love you too, little brother. Good night, Davie.

Exhausted but elated, Tom and I went to bed. I thought I was too keyed up to actually sleep, but next thing I knew the sun was streaking in through the window, with the smell of fresh-brewed coffee wafting up from the kitchen. I dressed as quickly as I could, given that I was still stiff, sore, and very, very tired—no doubt a legacy from the lightning strike. I would have gladly stayed in bed the entire day, but Alice waited downstairs.

"Morning, Dad," Tom greeted me as I staggered into the kitchen. He was washing a sink full of dishes. "Or should I say, 'afternoon, Dad'? It's a little past twelve. I would have waited breakfast for you, but I felt you really needed a good lie-in, and I was too hungry to wait any longer."

I mumbled morning, or something like that, and poured myself a cup of black coffee, to help me kick start the day. Although I wasn't really hungry, I knew I had to eat something, or else face a day filled with fatigue and headaches. Cheerios and whole milk was about all I could handle.

Tom was as bright-eyed and bushy-tailed as I had ever seen him; positively ebullient. He sat down beside me, and like me—*exactly* like me—he held his coffee cup in both hands, with both elbows resting on the kitchen table. We stared at each other, and laughed.

"Okay, like father, like son," Tom stated the obvious. "But it didn't turn out exactly like either of us thought it would, did it, Dad?"

"Come again?" I asked, uncertain what Tom was referring to.

"The occult thing. You know, about what happens to the dead."

"I don't know about that, son," I paused. "What we're looking at isn't heaven, Hades, the underworld, or the afterlife. It's our world, almost exactly the same, but very, very slightly out of phase, in a different time or dimension."

"True. But in our world, my aunt died long ago. In the other world, she's still alive. That's what I mean, that maybe there's a world somewhere or sometime or somehow, where everybody who has died or been killed is still alive."

"But then they all grow old and die."

"Are you certain of that?" Tom pointedly asked. "So far, we have discovered a world that apparently was created at the instant your sister died. What's to prevent yet another world from being created if she were later killed in a car crash, or had a terminal disease, or, sometime in the far future, dies of old age? And in that world twice or thrice removed, she would still be alive, possibly young and healthy? No, Dad, we can't say with any certainty that this new world or other dimension where Alice lives isn't

the province of the dead. Maybe it's an elaborate psychodrama God gives us after the endomorphins in our system run out at death, an illusion that we're not dead but still alive somewhere."

"For what purpose?" I devil's advocated.

"Damned if I know, except most people dread dying, fearing that there's either nothing on the Other Side, or worse yet, eternal damnation and endless retribution for their sins."

I slowly shook my head.

Tom continued, "Maybe the Other Side is simply the passage from one dimension to another, to another, to another, endlessly. That's not too far off from how Easterners view reality, except they call it reincarnation. Remember that old sci fi series of *Matrix* movies? You know, where everybody vegetates in isolated pods and has elaborate shared dreams of experiencing real life, when the reality is they're simply organic fodder for conquering robots? Who's to say that we don't really have some pod-like existence, and what we believe is real life is a fantastic collective illusion? You know, like Lao-Tzu's poem in which he asks if he were a man dreaming he was a butterfly, or was he a butterfly dreaming he was a man?"

"Or worse yet, Dad," Tom pointed out, "after what Alice told us, can we definitely state it wasn't *you* who died on the lake that day, that it isn't *your* world that split away from Alice's, and that it isn't *you* dreaming all of this while your body molders in the grave?"

It was a sobering speculation, one for which I had no snappy retort or logical comeback. Now more fully awake as much from the coffee as from Tom's speculations and company, I quickly finished my Cheerios and went into the study to communicate with Alice

Alice was waiting. Upon seeing my Morse greeting, she pointed to her laptop where she had typed, *Davie, now that we have found each other again, will we ever be able to reach across the chasm . . . physically, I mean?*

I responded in Morse, *I don't know. But now that we have opened a doorway, however tenuous, maybe, someday, who knows—*

Suddenly, the time-delayed cascading Alpha Channel images became a staccato of activity, like the old-fashioned arcade flip books we used to enjoy as children. Into Alice's study burst eight or nine men and women in some sort of baggy black paramilitary uniforms. They wore no patches or any other forms of identification that I could see, so I didn't even know if they were police or soldiers—or rent-a-cops. I saw no weapons. One wiry man roughly pushed Alice away from the laptop. A squat woman with large gloves grabbed an overly excited Woofy by the collar, threw a muzzle over his head and dragged him away. The remaining storm troopers then parted to make room for a tall, silver-haired civilian in a dark suit and grey turtleneck sweater. Exuding authority, he walked up to where the Brady was flickering, and looked directly at us. The man turned and spoke to one of the officers, who immediately sat down at Alice's laptop and began typing.

YOU ARE ILLEGALLY COMMUNICATING WITH AN UNAUTHORIZED RECEIVER. IDENTIFY YOURSELF. I could see Alice struggling

against the policeman who held her, obviously arguing. She was all but ignored.

Who are you people? I tapped out, indignant. Scared.

The silver-haired man said something to the policeman at the keyboard, who nodded and typed: **WE ARE FROM THE LAWRENCE LIVERMORE ENFORCEMENT DIVISION, REALITY #HR724W5. WE DETECTED YOUR PULSES AND TRACED THEM TO THIS LOCATION. IDENTIFY YOUR AFFILIATION AND ASSIGNED REALITY NUMBER. EXPLAIN WHAT TECHNOLOGY YOU ARE USING TO ATTAIN VISUAL CONNECTION.**

I was floored by the assumption that multiple, no, myriad, no, *infinite* concurrent realities the seven-digit alphanumeric identification number implied. How many dimensions are out there, perhaps only a picosecond's distance away? How many millions or trillions of Alices live just a sliver of a fingertip beyond my grasp?

I stared at the last frame of Alice, held firmly against her will by those goons. I tapped out *I love you*, then turned to my son. "Switch the camera off, Tom," I ordered.

Tom fumbled with the controls on top of the Brady. The last images from the other dimension continued to stream in, from the delayed RAW files. In them, I saw my sister press the fingers of her right hand to her lips, then raise her hand toward me. A last kiss, knowing, I suppose, that it was her irrevocable goodbye. In the final image, Alice was no longer in the room.

Tom eventually broke the silence. "Wow." It was more of a sigh than a word.

We collapsed in the closest chairs and began manically talking, speculating on the scientific nature of alternate universes and time/space continuums. But both of us carefully avoided asking the hard questions: Does our reality also have a seven-digit identification number? Would we soon be visited by Lawrence Livermore Enforcement Division goons? How long has this inter-dimensional intercourse been going on? Years? Centuries? Is there any way to physically travel among realities? Were we the first to visually communicate with another dimension, courtesy of a lightning-damaged new technology? And most important to me, would I ever see or speak with Alice again?

Soon—too soon—Tom said, "I've got to get back to the city, Dad. I have an eight o'clock class tomorrow morning." I desperately wanted him to stay, but Tom seemed to want to get away from the farm as quickly as possible. In a way, I didn't blame him. It was positively spooky, realizing that as isolated and deserted as we might seem, we were really rubbing elbows with dozens, thousands, perhaps an infinite number of our other selves, all so very, very near and yet impossibly far away. My eyes were filled with tears as his car pulled out of the driveway.

Alone, I spent the evening polishing off an entire six pack while watching the Cartoon Network.

It stormed hard that night, but I was so wasted that I slept through un-

til almost noon. After breakfast, I called Dr. Wu's vidphone, to brief him on what had transpired and arrange to fly out to the west coast the following day. I was stunned when a synthesized voice informed me that his number was no longer in service. I then dialed PictureForm Technology's general number, only to hear the same ominous message. Directory assistance confirmed my worst fear by announcing there was no such listing, no such company.

It got worse. I called Tom's apartment and wristphone, but they had been disconnected, too. Without even thinking, I jumped in my car and drove like a madman to New York City, to Tom's third floor walkup. But he was gone, the apartment completely empty. In desperation, I punched in Barry's number, letting it ring thirty times before finally hanging up. No sooner had I ended the call when my vidphone rang. It was Bob Beider, our town's volunteer fire chief.

His grim face on the tiny screen told the story even before he spoke. "It's bad, real bad, David," he said solemnly. "Seems Barry Logan went postal. Burnt your place down to the ground. Everything—the studio, the house, even your SUV. All gone. Then he blew his head clear off with a shotgun. Everybody's in shock." Bob panned his vidphone around my smoldering property. As he said, nothing was left, including, I assumed, the Brady camera and all of Alice's images stored on the computer system. Just as I was about to write off Barry as someone who had been pushed over the edge, I remembered that, as a devout Catholic, he never, ever would have committed suicide. A chill ran down my spine.

• I was next.

I knew I would be killed unless I disappeared immediately, so I left the car parked on the street below Tom's place, along with my credit cards and vidphone. I withdrew as much cash as my midtown bank would give me, boarded a Trailways bus at Port Authority Terminal for El Paso, and then illegally walked across the border into Mexico. I now live under an assumed name in a medium-sized city in the Yucatan, not far from the Honduran border. The room is cheap, no one hassles me, and because I left no paper trail during my getaway, I thought that I would be reasonably safe so long as my money held out.

I spent most days at the local library, surfing the Web, looking for anything that could corroborate my story. That's how I came across a grocer in Wales who talks by ham radio to his deceased twin brother, a housewife in Lyons whose television intermittently receives programs from a non-existent local station, and a Canadian inventor who swears his machine allows travel to different dimensions. I took a chance and sent the man an email yesterday, asking for details. It looks as if I made a serious mistake, however, because a half-hour ago, as I was rounding the corner, the building I had lived in for two months suddenly exploded and burst into flames. A gas main, bystanders cried, but I knew better.

I'm back at the library now, typing as fast as I can, trying to get everything down before it closes in fifteen minutes. Where I will go, what I will do, I have no idea. I suspect that it doesn't matter, that they will be waiting for me outside. At least I now have the satisfaction of knowing that you have read the truth and may carry on after me. ○

WAKING CHANG-ER

Samantha Ling

Samantha Ling is a graduate of Clarion West 2001 who lives in California. Her first publication takes an imaginative look at an ancient Chinese fairy tale.

“Wake up!” She doesn’t flinch when I touch her face. I never think that she will, but I always hope that she does.

“Chang-Er!”

Nothing.

She doesn’t flinch when I jump on her chest either, just lies there like a doll, like a dead thing. Her eyes are closed, and for everyone involved (meaning me), it’s as if she’s dead, but I know that she’s not. She just doesn’t want to move. Ever since the love of her life died, she’s just lain there. I thought she’d get over it and move on by now, but no, she’s still grieving as if he’d died yesterday. He’s been dead four thousand years; he’s not coming back, and lying there won’t bring him back either. But do you think she listens to me? No, of course not. I’m just the Jade Rabbit.

“Wake up!” I shout. But it’s not really even shouting, since I don’t have any vocal chords. It’s more like a telepathic communication. I know that she can hear me; we used to talk this way all the time. She’s just ignoring me. “Chang-Er!”

I jump up and down on her chest, but she doesn’t even acknowledge me. She gives underneath my weight like the bed. I’d spit on her if I could, but I can’t. I don’t have any saliva. You’d think the sages would make me into, oh, I don’t know, something with hands or like manual dexterity, so I can unlock doors and stuff. Maybe then I could open some windows or something, maybe some doors, so I can get *out* of here. But no, the sages had to make me into jade, as if jade made any difference up here on the moon. It’s supposed to be lucky. Yeah, it’s given me so much luck that I’ve been trapped in the Moon Palace for four thousand years! How’s that supposed to be lucky? Tell me that!

Whatever. The sages abandoned me like all the other fairies.

“Chang-Er!” I say. “Get up!”

Nothing.

I didn’t think anything would come of it, but I’ve got to try at least

every three or four hundred years. I haven't completely given up hope, you know. At least I'm still trying.

Ugggh. I'm covered in dust. That is just so gross. It's completely filthy here. Moon dust covers everything, from the floors to the furniture to the tapestry on the walls. When I don't move for three hundred years, I end up covered in dust too, but even if I did move, I'd still be covered in dust. It's everywhere.

Chang-Er is covered in dust too, except that jumping up and down on her has disturbed it and made a cloud. I used to care. I used to delicately brush away the dust that covered her face, except that I wasn't very good at it. The charcoal around her right eye is smeared, her lip rouge too. She looks like a discarded lover now rather than a grieving widow. I don't care anymore. She doesn't care, so why should I?

I bunch up her silk dress around me to try and get warm. I can't get warm though, there isn't any heat coming from Chang-Er, and everybody knows that jade is cold until a warm body heats it up. But I bunch up her dress anyway. It's a habit of mine from when I was a real rabbit. Sometimes, I wish the sages would have just eaten me and let me move on. But then, I wouldn't be having such a dandy old time on the moon.

Sometimes, I dream. Not always, but sometimes I do. And sometimes, I see things from Earth when my mind wanders. I can see everything from the moon, regardless of which side of the Earth is facing us. Most of the time, what I see is like background noise. I don't actually pay attention to it.

I dreamt tonight. I dreamt of a little girl. She had long black hair and pale white skin. And no, she wasn't Snow White, get a grip.

She was singing to me. I don't know what song, but it was a nice song. We were in a field, and I was hopping along beside her. She wore a red dress and a matching ribbon in her hair. Her white tights were pristine, even though she was playing in the dirt. She had this laugh that made me want to smile, except that I can't. Rabbits don't smile. I just twitched my tail really fast and hopped around her. And I wasn't made of jade either, but real flesh and bone and fur. She picked me up and laughed again. And she was warm. Oh, was she warm! It was so nice, I didn't want her to wake up, but you know, everybody has to wake up sometime, or else they'd be dead.

So she wakes up in the middle of her dream, in the middle of the night. I'm no longer in her dream, but watching her from the cold depths of the Moon Palace. And it wasn't something like she needed to go to the bathroom or anything. No. It was more like a death cough, a hacking, phlegmy death cough that wakes her up and makes her dad run into the room with a glass of water.

It's never a happy ending, is it? It's always got to be something horrific like that. Why is it that the people who dream of me are always the sickly, dying ones? It's just so unfair. I don't have any friends.

She hocks up a big green blob into a tissue her dad holds for her, and she's better.

She has a white rabbit in her arms. It's wearing a plaid waistcoat and

glasses. How come nobody ever thinks about making a stuffed rabbit out of me? Oh wait, that's because they make little itty bitty jade charms in the form of rabbits that they use as keychains and they knock them around, making dents and cracks in the jade. Lucky me.

"Are you hungry, Yueh-Hua?" her father asks, and she nods. He leaves and returns with a baked pastry the width of his fist.

"What's this?" she asks.

"Mooncake," he says. The butter knife clinks against the plate as he cuts through the inch-thick cake.

"What's it made of?" She picks a slice up and inspects the brown flaky crust, the purple insides with a yellow center.

"Red beans and egg yolk."

"How come we don't eat this all the time?"

"Because it's special cake for the Moon Festival."

"How come we only eat it during the Moon Festival?"

She's nothing but inquisitive, isn't she?

Her father sits down at the edge of her bed and smooths down her hair. "A lot of reasons," he says. She takes a bite of the egg yolk and decides that she doesn't like it. Her father sees her wrinkled nose and puts his cupped hand underneath her mouth. She spits it out. He puts it into a napkin and places that on the night table. "There's a story about how, years and years ago, the Chinese people rebelled against their Mongolian rulers. They had planned to attack during the Moon Festival, but the thing was, they couldn't tell each other about it without being caught. So one of them decided to bake these special cakes for the festival, and in each cake was a note telling everyone what the plan was. And on that night, the Chinese people overthrew their rulers. So we eat these mooncakes to celebrate their victory."

"Is that true?"

"Maybe," he says.

She decides that she likes the thick sweet red bean paste that looks more purple than red, and finishes it off with the glass of water.

"It's late, Yueh-Hua," her father says. "Get to bed."

She lies back down and he pulls the cover up to her chin. He gives her a kiss on the forehead.

"Who will take care of you when I'm gone?" she says.

Without even thinking, her father replies, "You're not going anywhere." But deep down inside, he isn't so sure. "You're going to be right here with me."

She smiles and doesn't believe him. He tucks the white rabbit in beside her. "Good night, Daddy," she says.

"Good night," he says, and sits down in a chair beside her bed. He wants to make sure she sleeps all right. When Yueh-Hua thinks that he can't hear, she whispers to her white rabbit, "Take care of my daddy when I'm gone."

It makes her dad's eyes tear to hear it. And it makes me want to cry too, except that I can't. All that emotion is too much for me, so I leave.

I open my eyes and I see that Chang-Er's eyes are open too. I don't get my hopes up, though. Sometimes she blinks.

* * *

"Tell me about the Moon Lady again," Yueh-Hua asks. They are at the hospital, awaiting results of a test. The room is small enough for two chairs, and a lie-down bed for examination. On the walls are posters like "Have you immunized your child?" and brightly colored stuffed animals hanging from a shelf. Yueh-Hua chooses to play with her rabbit. She flips it into the air, making it do two and a half somersaults before she catches it again.

Her father brushes her hair away from her forehead, hair which has grown too long, he realizes. He puts his arm around her and she settles into the crook, leaning up against him as she hugs her rabbit. "The Moon Lady," her father begins, "was once a mortal woman thousands of years ago. Her name was Chang-Er, and she was married to a man named Hou Yi."

"Did they have any children?" Yueh-Hua asks, lifting her head to look at her father.

"I don't think so," he replies. "Now thousands of years ago, there used to be ten suns. Each sun took turns occupying the sky. But one day, all ten suns decided they wanted to appear. The heat was so strong that the rivers dried up. And with no rivers to water the plants, the crops died too. With no food and no water, the people began to suffer. The Emperor, seeing that his people were dying, asked their best archer to shoot down the suns. It so happened that Hou Yi was that man. But when the Emperor asked him to do this, he refused, because Chang-Er was very sick. He did not want to leave her alone. But Chang-Er said that the people needed his help and that he needed to do this for them. Otherwise, there would be no one left. So he left, but before he agreed to do this thing, he made the Emperor promise that he would receive a pill of immortality. The Emperor—and remember that the Emperors were from heaven and thus gods themselves—said yes. He promised Hou Yi that he would have the magic pill when he returned. So Hou Yi left and shot down nine of the ten suns, leaving the last to brighten the day and make the plants grow. When he received the pill, he hurried back to Chang-Er and crushed it into a glass of rice wine. She didn't know that he had done this for her, and so when she drank the wine, she was healed and ascended to heaven, toward the moon, and that's how she came to live there."

"I like that story," Yueh-Hua says.

"Me, too," he replies, rather sadly.

I wait for him to continue the story, but he doesn't. No one ever continues after that part. They always want to leave it at happily-ever-after.

So Chang-Er and Hou Yi were very happy together for a time. She would ride down on her little cloud and spend time with him, or she would take him to the Moon Palace, or, some days, they'd just float around for hours doing nothing but being together. It was so sickeningly sweet that it made even the love fairies gag.

But eventually, Chang-Er realized that Hou Yi was aging. He was getting slower, his hair was graying, and his skin was beginning to wrinkle. And that's when she realized that he would die soon. Well, I mean, he was mortal, it was bound to happen. So she began asking the other fairies and

the other gods to help her save him. But none of them would help. They said that his reward was the pill of immortality, and he had given that up for her. He made his choice and that was that. So she cursed them, to age and die. And when Hou Yi lay down for the last time and slept forever, that was when Chang-Er lay down too, threw everyone out of the Moon Palace and sealed it up. Unfortunately for me, I was still sleeping inside. It's my fault for looking like a giant jade statue.

"Who do you think built her palace?" Yueh-Hua asks.

"Mmm . . . fairies?" her father says.

"What do you think it's made out of?"

"Moon dust."

You'd think that from the looks of the place.

The doctor returns with a thick chart in her hands. She's got her hair tied back in a bun so tight it stretches out her skin. Yueh-Hua's father looks hopefully at the doctor, but she refuses to give him any hope.

"I'm afraid the treatments aren't working," she says. "We'll have to try something else."

He looks as though he will collapse, but he holds it together enough not to shake.

"I have to go through chemo again?" Yueh-Hua asks.

"Yes," the doctor replies. "I'm afraid so."

"Okay," Yueh-Hua says. "It'll be okay. It's not so bad—"

Then I feel a push and I'm falling. I hit the cold hard marble, cracking it as I smash against it. Dazed, I shake my head. I can't have fallen from the bed, not at that velocity. Chang-Er must have pushed me. I jump back onto the bed.

"Go away," Chang-Er says. She doesn't say it through her voice, but with her mind. "Leave me alone."

"No," I reply. "You need to get up. I'm tired of being alone."

"Go away," she says, trying to push me off the bed again, but I jump around, avoiding her hands.

"Listen to me!"

She grabs me behind the shoulders, leaving my legs to flail around as I try to get out of her grasp. I hate it when she holds me like this. I don't feel secure, but does she care? Of course not. She doesn't ever care. She walks to the door, throws me out into the courtyard, and slams the door shut with a loud bang.

"You can't hide forever!"

She doesn't reply. The sound of her bare feet against the marble fades away from me.

Great.

GREAT! I'm outside!

Finally! I can get off this moon.

All I have to do is get someone to fetch me. So I send out a call for the fairies, "I'm out of the Moon Palace, someone come save me!"

And I wait for someone to come.

And wait.

And wait.

When someone finally comes, he's floating in on his cloud and not even

wearing the old-fashioned clothes. He's wearing big baggy pants that have been cut off and frayed on the bottom, and a long-sleeved blue T-shirt underneath a short T-shirt that has a picture of a kid giving everyone the bird.

But you know, if he's here to save me, why should I care what he looks like?

"Over here!" I say.

He flies over to the courtyard, taking his time. I'm jumping up and down so that he can see where I am. When he arrives, he's looking down on me.

"Dude," he says. He sounds like a surfer guy. "I've always heard about you, but nobody's ever seen you. Thought you were a total myth, man."

"Yeah, I'm real. Get me out of here."

"No can do, man. The courtyard's off-limits, too. Get Chang-Er to lift the spell and I'll take you out. In the meantime, sucks to be you."

He starts to fly off.

"Hey, wait!"

But he's already decided he isn't going to help me. And once he's told everyone I am stuck in the courtyard, nobody else will bother to come either. So I'm stuck again, but this time in the cold frigid outdoors rather than the cold frigid indoors. At least indoors, I was immune to the elements. The wind is starting to pick up, blowing the moon dust everywhere.

I spent so much time wishing I was outside, and now that I am, I wish I wasn't. Dust billows into clouds as I hop along. I finally decide to settle in between two shriveled-up shrubs in the hopes that they might give me some warmth. They don't.

Yueh-Hua's hair is all gone now. Her skin has a shiny gleam that hasn't seen the sun, pale and almost translucent. I can see her veins spidering around her head like a giant web. She's in the children's ward of the hospital with the other sick children. An IV is attached to her arm, and wherever she goes, she has to drag the giant metallic IV stand with her. None of the other children think anything of it. They're used to seeing that type of thing. She's playing with building blocks at a miniature table for children.

"What are you building?" a girl asks. This one has pale blonde hair that goes down to her waist.

"A palace," Yueh-Hua replies.

"Can I play?"

MOVING?

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"Sure."

The girl begins to pile blocks up into a castle.

"This is a Chinese palace," Yueh-Hua says. "It's not a castle."

"What's the difference?"

"A castle has a moat, a palace doesn't. And a Chinese Palace has a large courtyard, and it's more like a square. Like this." She rearranges the blocks. "See?"

"Who lives in the palace?"

"The Moon Lady."

"Is she pretty?"

"Yeah," Yueh-Hua says. "Like my mommy."

Chang-Er slides open the door to the courtyard and gently scoops me up into her arms.

"I wish things were different," she says.

"It can be different," I say. "Open up the Moon Palace. Let the other fairies back."

She holds me close to her chest, supporting my rear so I don't feel so vulnerable.

"They won't help me," she says. "They didn't help me before. They won't help me now."

"You'd be surprised what they'd pay to return to the Kingdom of Heaven."

So she opens the doors to the palace, and the dust disappears, leaving the Moon Palace as it had once been. We call to the other fairies and we wait. And we wait. Until finally, we see the Monkey God in the distance. Chang-Er hates him intensely for playing a cruel trick on her beloved. The Monkey God almost killed him that day. I suggest that she leave as I talk to him, and she does.

The Monkey God is jingling with bells and he's laughing, probably at another trick he's pulled on some poor human. He jumps down from his cloud and hops to the door and scratches his face. "Oooh oooh aaahh aaaah," he says making his monkey noise, "I didn't believe it was true," he says as I approach him.

"Welcome back," I say. He begins to pace back and forth at the threshold. He's always been fidgety.

"Oooh oooh aaaah aaah," he says again, jumping up and down and generally being too excited for his own good. I always hated that about him. "I'm not quite in."

"No," I say, "We need something from you first."

"Extortion!" he shouts, jumping to the top of the door frame and letting himself swing there.

"An exchange," I reply.

"Of what?"

"We want to save the girl."

"I know nothing of saving lives," he says, jumping down to the floor.

"But you know who can."

"No one can. There's no longer an Emperor of China, no one to extole

gifts. Chang-Er cursed too many fairies. You remember, she said, 'grow old and die'? Well, they grew old and died. It's her own fault for cursing them."

"So you can't help me?"

The Monkey God shrugs his shoulders. "Is Chang-Er still mad at me?"

"She doesn't want to talk to you."

He sits down, a rarity for him, and scratches his rear.

"Remember that Chang-Er took the pill that cured her of illness. She should look inside herself for answers."

"What do you mean?"

He jumps on his cloud. "Gotta go. People to see, tricks to play."

"What do you mean about Chang-Er?"

He turns to me, looks me in the eye so seriously that it makes my non-existent skin crawl. "She asked for the wrong thing last time." And he zooms off before I can ask him to clarify.

"What did he say?" Chang-Er asks. She sits down on the lacquered bench. I jump up next to her, my jade feet clacking against the varnished wood.

When I tell her about what the Monkey God said, she sits very quietly for a few moments.

"Why does he have to be so cryptic? Why can't he talk like a normal person?" I say.

"Because, unlike us, he's never been normal."

She sits very tall and straight, even as she thinks. Her hands are neatly laid on top of each other as they rest on her lap. She's so still that I think, for a moment, that she's lapsed again. But she takes in a big breath of air and she says, "There's a theory that if you ingest a part of an animal, you'll gain the characteristics of that animal."

"You mean like if you eat the meat of a bull, you'll be big and strong?"

"Yes," she replied. "What if that's what he meant? What if I can somehow heal her?"

"You want her to eat you?"

"No, not eat. Drink."

She has wrapped me in a blanket, knowing that I dislike the cold. We fly on her little cloud toward Earth, in the hopes of saving Yueh-Hua. We're traveling so quickly that the wind tugs at the blanket. I have to grip it with my paws to keep it from flying away, but jade is so smooth. It's threatening to slip.

"You know, this could all be some joke. That monkey can't help himself!" She doesn't reply.

Yueh-Hua's hospital room is cold and it makes me tremble. It's dark, but for the moonlight that enters between the curtains. I can barely see, but Chang-Er can. It's so quiet, it reminds me of my solitude.

Yueh-Hua's father stirs in his chair, but does not wake from his sleep when we pass him. Chang-Er puts me next to Yueh-Hua. From here, I can see too many tubes attached to her. She's even thinner than before. Something I didn't think could happen.

Chang-Er touches Yueh-Hua's hairless head to awaken her.

"Momma?" Yueh-Hua asks.

"Shhh," Chang-Er says.

"Momma, it hurts."

"I know." Chang-Er raises her sleeve and slits her wrist with a scalpel that she took from the hospital supply room. "Drink."

Yueh-Hua looks at the dripping blood, but does nothing.

"It's all right," Chang-Er says. She helps Yueh-Hua lift her head and Yueh-Hua drinks two gulps. "That's a good girl." We wait and watch, waiting, expecting. But nothing happens. Yueh-Hua closes her eyes and falls asleep. And I hope, for everyone's sake, that this works.

When she awakens in the morning, she feels better, but she still doesn't have the energy to move. Most of the pain has gone away, though.

"I saw Momma last night," Yueh-Hua says. "She told me everything will be okay."

"Of course it will," her father says. Tears glisten in his eyes and his voice is a bit shaky. Her father reads her stories all day until his voice is hoarse.

We all thought that she was going to make it. I mean, she's sitting up and she's eating on her own. Some days she has enough energy to play with the other kids. But mostly she likes to listen to her father tell stories.

But we were all very wrong. You know what she had the nerve to do? I couldn't believe it when I saw.

She had the nerve to die. After hanging on for so long, she gives up and dies.

I'm so angry that I go and yell at the stupid monkey. You know what he said?

"Oooh ooh aaah aah, I never told you it would work. Oooh ooh aah aah." And he bounds off faster than I can fly Chang-Er's cloud. I. Hate. Him.

Chang-Er, in the meantime, cries every waking moment.

At least, Yueh-Hua died in her sleep and relatively happy.

I don't know what it was about this little girl that brought Chang-Er out from the deep depths of her sleep. I can't explain it myself. And I don't know why I'm so sad that she's gone now. I knew from the beginning that we couldn't save her, but something made me wish that we had.

Chang-Er goes to visit Yueh-Hua's father sometimes. She pretends like she's human again, and they go to dinner like normal people. She's not in love with him; I can see that. But she isn't looking for love. Not that kind and not anymore. She's moving about, going on with life, which is more than I could say for her a hundred years ago.

The surfer fairy takes me with him places now. He talks funny, but I've gotten used to his strange words. He takes me in a little backpack and surfs. I can see the waves come crashing down around us, but somehow he manages never to get swept under. I wouldn't mind really. The water's warm.

It's always warm where he goes.

And I'm not cold anymore. ○

DAREDEVIL

Cowards and weaklings are not the stuff of volcanologists. Some expedition members peed themselves when they passed into pre-Pangaeian time; I jumped through the Hole with a whoop, like a Viking warrior, bellowing my joy at the prospect of tweaking the Devil so soon after he had got his butt kicked out of Paradise.

I danced on the rims of young volcanoes, leaped in, leaped out—not, like Empedocles, to become a god, but because I was a strong fearless man and did not give a great goddamn who knew it, just as long as everybody did in fact know it.

I swore over good whiskey and rough food, "I mean to look down into Hell and spit right in Lucifer's eye. We'll just see how badly the old boy wants me and hear how much noise he makes when he gets up his nerve."

The Devil waited, however, until I went down to the camp in the lowlands that drain into the proto-Atlantic. Then he caused a blood vessel in my head to burst, and I fell, not into the earth's crucible, but off a small boat, and died, not in a blaze of glory, but all wet.

—Steven Utley



THE REAL DEAL

Peter Friend

This is the Peter Friend's second story to appear in *Asimov's*. His first, about a highly unusual "Christmas Tree," was published in our December 2004 issue.

No presents, no cards, not even a cheerful "Happy birthday, monkey boy" for me at breakfast time. Okay, I knew we'd be landing soon and Flegg was excited—she couldn't stop talking about how this time it was the real deal and soon she'd be rich, rich, rich. But hey, I never forgot *her* damned birthdays every hundred and fifty-nine days, so you'd think she could make an effort to remember mine every three hundred and sixty-five.

"It is beautiful, true?" she trilled, waving all five legs at the navigation screen.

I didn't say anything. I was sulking, and anyway, "it" wasn't beautiful. Apart from the encrypted homing-beacon signal, it was just another rock, the same as the zillion other asteroids all around us.

"Can I drive?" I asked casually.

"True, true," she muttered, to my surprise, and started singing.

She must be in a *great* mood. She was forever giving me piloting lessons "in case of emergency, please, true," but normally I wasn't allowed anywhere near the pilot chair without her hovering over me. Today, however, she seemed only interested in somersaulting across the ceiling while singing excerpts from "Death on Vlarniun," her favorite morbid religious saga.

Like every other Picasso, Flegg devoutly believed that God created the universe, then got bored and left, possibly to create other universes, although this was a major point of argument. Anyway, supposedly the last place in this universe touched by God was the planet Vlarniun, which just happened to be their own ancestral home planet before they reached space and went nomadic; therefore, your life was a success if you could arrange to breathe your final breath there.

The religious stuff didn't worry me, but Picasso singing sounds like dolphins arguing in a trumpet factory. I wasn't sorry when our scanners bleeped in excitement, silencing Flegg mid-honk. She pushed me out of the pilot chair and started tapping control panels.

The scanners confirmed that our destination was one big fat Artifact.

Well, we'd expected that. A Picasso named Dinali—one of Flegg's three fiancés, in approximate human terms—had discovered the Artifact, and he'd immediately called up Flegg and the other two in great excitement. I'd never met the guy, but presumably he knew a rock full of money when he saw one.

To the casual eye, the Artifact was just an asteroid with three little Picasso ships stuck onto one end, plugged into each other's airlocks like mating beetles. But this was the eleventh Artifact I'd seen in my three years working as a monkey, and I recognized the subtle outlines of ports and vents on the rocky surface.

We plugged our own airlock into the last ship and dressed in our best Collecting clothes.

Flegg insisted on giving me a quick medical check, even though my little rash had cleared up weeks ago. Picassos were obsessed with keeping their human employees healthy, which was fine by me—where I grew up, we had more riot police than doctors, and half the kids never reached their fifth birthdays.

"Don't worry, Grandma, I'll wear my scarf and mittens," I told her.

She gently punched me in the ribs. "So hard to get good help these days, true," she chortled, and launched herself up through the airlock.

I followed, a little slower. The Artifact spun fast enough to provide some pseudo-gravity, and I didn't want to embarrass myself by falling up or down or sideways. Sprained a wrist that way last year. Besides, I wanted a peek at the other ships as we passed through them, in case they had monkeys too.

All three were deserted; presumably everyone was inside the Artifact. The first ship was so new that the paint hadn't worn off its ladder rungs. The second smelled like burnt cheese, and the third had seven large green socks drying over an air vent—possible signs of humanity, but then again, Flegg liked cheese and I'd seen Picassos with seven feet.

Into the asteroid's interior and . . . wow. I'd never seen an Artifact this big, not even in pictures. Only a tiny fraction of the asteroid had been hollowed out, but even so, this chamber could have held a dozen Collector ships.

The walls were lined with the usual rows of tree-like storage racks. This place had obviously been a derelict for umpteen thousand years, since most of the rack webbing had long since perished and cargo was scattered everywhere. And something, maybe another asteroid, had collided with the Artifact long ago, giving it its current spin and heaping the loose cargo down at one end of the chamber.

Damn. I'd almost hoped this might be a false alarm, but it looked like it was indeed the "real deal," meaning that Flegg wouldn't need a monkey for much longer.

On a clear patch of "floor" under the light of a portable micro-sun, three Picassos held hands and danced in a ring. One hopped around on a single muscular leg, the others had the more usual three or four.

Of more personal interest to me were the two humans sitting nearby with their feet up on a wheezing air-scrubber. Both were female and about my age, and neither was ugly—and I wasn't just saying that because they were the only other humans I'd seen in months.

"Happy birthday, monkey boy," whispered Flegg, and punched me in the ribs again.

"Thank you," I whispered back.

Now I wasn't dumb enough to imagine I'd just landed on The Asteroid of the Red-Hot Nymphomaniacs, for all Flegg's good intentions. But I was overdue for some human company and maybe they felt the same.

Flegg bounded over and joined hands with the other three Picassos. I knew they'd spend the next few hours dancing in circles, that being what Picassos did whenever they met. So us monkeys might as well get to know each other—we had to fill in the time somehow, and Flegg had lectured me repeatedly that Collecting was against protocol until the dancing was over.

"Hi there, I'm Jayk," I said. "What's happening?"

"Nothing," said the redhead, sounding bored. "Unless you're an alien-dancing fan. Hi, I'm Khaj, and this here's Lira."

"Greetings," said Lira, a tall pale woman with legs no thicker than her skinny arms.

"You an orbital?" I asked.

She nodded. "Lagrange Beta, born and bred. This is my post-grad project. The trip, I mean, not the Artifact, although it will make a great chapter in my thesis."

About what I'd figured. A rich space kid on a Grand Tour, hardly a monkey at all.

"How about you, Jayk?" asked Khaj. "Going by your accent, I'm guessing Hong Kong?"

"Close. Blue Lotus Industrial Heaven, Earth's third-tallest slum, about two hundred kloms north. Maybe you've heard of it?"

They apparently had; both women looked impressed in a horrified sort of way.

"How'd you get near a Picasso recruiter in a place like that?" asked Lira.

"Dumb luck. One day I climbed up twenty-three balconies to escape an angry bubble dealer. A nine-year-old in the next tower videoed me and uploaded the footage to a news channel. A recruiter happened to see me on the evening news, and a month later, Flegg bought my citizen contract from Blue Lotus."

Khaj stuck out her lower lip and pretended to sulk, rather attractively, I thought. "I guess no one wants to hear about me studying for three years to win that boring old xeno-archaeology scholarship, then."

"Nope," Lira and I agreed, and we all laughed.

"How about some lunch?" I suggested. "I can cook, honest, and our ship has a half-decent kitchen."

"Aren't we supposed to stay here?" asked Khaj, looking over at the dancing Picassos. "Sorry, this is my first Artifact and I don't understand all this protocol. They raced here at top speed, but now all they want to do is shuffle around in circles like my grandparents waltzing at the BelVista Ballroom. Only minus any music. Okay, they're pleased to see each other, but this isn't what I was expecting."

"Dancing's very important in Picasso culture," said Lira, sounding like

she was lecturing from her thesis. "Think of it as shaking hands, hugging, praying, playing slamball, and recreational sex, all rolled into one. Well, when I say sex, they don't actually . . . get off on it."

That wasn't what Flegg had told me once, but I didn't want to sound like a sleazo or give away any secrets.

"This is no normal Artifact," I said, changing the subject. "Half the ones I've seen were empty or long since picked clean—Picassos have been Collecting through this particular asteroid belt for a thousand years. Flegg and I have had exactly one good find so far: a stone box full of what looked like glittery spaghetti. Selling it paid off the loan on Flegg's ship. But most finds barely pay for a few more months' fuel and life support."

"Such cynicism," said Lira. "Disillusioned with our thrilling adventures dashing through the cosmos? Would you rather be three hundred light years away on Earth?"

"I'm not complaining, I'm just pointing out that this here Artifact's a once-in-a-lifetime find—the real deal, as Flegg calls it. Our Picassos aren't just going to be stinking rich, they're also going to be famous—so they're being perfect little alien ladies and gentlemen, and recording the whole thing for posterity to prove it. Those five knobbly black cubes over by the micro-sun are autocameras, in case you hadn't realized."

Khaj sighed. "Obviously my dazzling career in xeno-archaeology is over before it even started. We're going to be unemployed once they're finished Collecting here, aren't we?"

"Afraid so. Still, monkeys are always in short supply, so some other Picassos should take us on, though we might have to return to Earth for a while."

"Suits me," said Lira. "My thesis research is pretty much finished anyway."

We glared at her.

"Oh yeah, sorry, forgot you two groundhogs are contracted citizens. Nothing personal. Stupid way to run a planet, if you ask me. Um . . . let's have lunch."

We climbed down through our ships.

"This one's ours," said Lira. "A little messy, I know. Dinali—that's my Picasso, the one-legged guy with six arms, two mouths and three eyes—he's been too excited to clean since we got here, and, um, I'm too lazy to clean, always have been."

"Nice socks," commented Khaj.

"They're Dinali's, not mine," Lira insisted, sounding defensive. "He thinks cashmere socks are the apex of human achievement, wears them on hands and foot for special occasions. Except dancing—he's afraid of wearing them out. Oh good, they're dry."

"This is Molga's," said Khaj as we dropped into the cheesy-smelling second ship. "He doesn't have a monkey—told me yesterday it's 'cowardly.'"

"We're cowards?"

"No, I think he means using us for Collecting is cowardly. Maybe he prefers the good old days nine years ago before they discovered Earth. He doesn't seem to dislike us though, he made everyone pizza here last night. Nice person, in fact all the Picassos I've met so far are nice—always

careful to talk in English when we're around, doing their best to remember who we each are despite us all having the same number of limbs and heads. But seriously, Jayk, I hope you cook better than *he* does!"

She waved an arm. "And this next ship here is ours. Spandrel only started Collecting a few months ago. Her four parents bought her this brand-new ship and my contract, and ever since we've been whizzing around and scanning random asteroids without so much as a nibble."

Last was our own ship. Flegg had nagged me to spring-clean, and I'd moaned and whined at the time, but right now I was glad the place looked sparkly fresh. Khaj and Lira oohed and aahed over our herb garden, then got all wide-eyed when I pulled out my mixing bowls and measuring spoons.

"Don't you guys get tired of endless microwaved ration squeezies?" I asked.

Lira shrugged and Khaj nodded.

"Give me a little gravity and I prefer to cook up some real food," I continued, hoping we had something classier than soy burgers left in our null larder.

We did. An hour later, I had a bacon-and-egg pie ready to bake. Even made the pastry by hand, just to show off. I chopped a salad, Lira climbed up to her ship and returned with a bottle of wine, and Khaj contributed some ice cream with gloopy fruit syrup, so we had ourselves a fancy meal.

My pie turned out pretty good, considering all the ingredients except the herbs had been hibernating in our null larder for months. Food may last forever in a null field, but it doesn't taste the same as fresh if you ask me. Anyway, Khaj and Lira insisted the pie was great, and I didn't think they were just being polite.

As we poured the last of the wine, hooting and warbling echoed through the open airlocks. Hoping this signaled the dancing was over, we climbed back up to the Artifact, carrying full water bottles because dancing is thirsty work even for Picassos.

Yes, they were all danced out, for the moment at least. We were formally introduced to Molga, Flegg, Dinali, and Spandrel.

"We hope you are well," they chorused. Such a polite race. Then they each guzzled five liters or so of water.

I offered to cook them something, but no, apparently dancing outranked Collecting but Collecting still outranked eating. And nothing outranked the Competitive Collecting we were told was about to start, something that I'd never done before and which frankly sounded like a stupid party game—but that was just my opinion.

Dinali marked four large circles on the floor.

"Everyone are ready?" he asked.

"This is ridiculous. How do we know what to Collect?" Khaj whispered to me.

"We don't," I said. "That's the point, I think. Avoid those piles of little grey lumps that look like crumbly old beans—they really are crumbly old beans. Other than that, just grab anything that looks cool. Think of it as beachcombing."

"Grave-robbing, more like it," she muttered. "All that talk back on Earth about 'archaeology' was obviously bullshit—we're here to scavenge everything that isn't bolted down, aren't we?"

I shrugged. "Collecting valuables left behind by dead ancestors shows respect for those ancestors' Collecting ability. And if it's profitable as well, then that in turn also honors the ancestors. Or so Flegg says. Who are *we* to judge? Their fourth interstellar empire was in decline when us humans were inventing stone axes!"

Dinali glared at us, looked over at the autocameras and warbled something inspirational for the benefit of the Picassos back home. Then he galloped toward a promising looking pile of cargo, closely followed by the other Picassos. Lira darted up a wall, graceful in the low gravity as you'd expect from someone who'd spent her whole life in space.

I soon found some red stretch—like rubbery globs of non-sticky glue full of curly threads. Most Artifacts had some lying around in them, and I knew it was valuable, whatever it actually was. Awkward to carry though. By the time I'd dragged it back to Flegg's circle, most of the others were on their third trip.

Molga was doing just fine without a monkey. He had enormous fingers and toes, and could climb a lot better than the average Picasso, nearly as well as a human. And more importantly, he knew what to look for. His treasure pile was the smallest, but somehow the stuff in it just *looked* better.

I knew we were really only competing for bragging points, but I still wanted Flegg and me to "win," so I hurried back to work.

Draped over a buckled rack were several meters of shimmering tubing that reminded me of that glittery "spaghetti" we'd found last year, so I grabbed it. Flegg looked delighted when she saw it.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I have no idea," she warbled, "but is most pretty, true? We will win, true, clever monkey!"

And so on, for an hour. Everything was going fine until Khaj forgot the difference between mass and weight. I saw her shove a huge girder sideways with all her strength, and naturally, it *kept* moving, taking her with it.

"Let go!" I shouted, but too late, or perhaps her hand was trapped in it. She yelled in pain, doubled-up, and swerved through the air, clutching her left hand. She landed flat on her back, and was showered by a gentle avalanche of debris. Judging by her swearing, she wasn't seriously hurt.

Lira evidently didn't think so. "Didn't they give you groundhogs any micro-gravity training?" she smirked.

"Visit Earth's surface sometime, stick insect—those skinny legs of yours would snap like twigs," Khaj snarled back.

The Picassos converged on her, preventing further hostilities, and her broken thumb was soon reset and wrapped in stonefoam.

"I've spoiled everything, haven't I?" she moaned.

"You found some cool stuff," I said, trying to distract her. "What are these under your leg?"

"I dunno. They are nice, aren't they?"

"They" were seven transparent spheres the size of tennis balls. Seeing

them, all four Picassos made noises like drunken turkeys and flailed their limbs.

From his belt, Dinali pulled what looked like a melted toy ray gun. He held it to the spheres one by one, and it rumbled each time.

"Solid diamond," he announced, and the Picassos all did the turkey noise again. Dinali carefully placed the spheres in Khaj's lap.

"Is that good?" she asked. "I mean, I know they'd be valuable on Earth, but I don't know much about your ancestors' technology."

"Us not either," said Spandrel, picked up Khaj as if she were a large rag doll, and waddled over to the autocameras.

The Picassos spent the next twenty minutes speechifying to the cameras. We humans watched in bemusement, not understanding a word, although clearly the spheres were the topic of discussion, and I knew Flegg's body language well enough to know that she was happy.

Eventually, Spandrel put Khaj down and gestured to Lira and me to join them.

"We are agreeing, true," said Dinali. "Seven of us, and seven spheres; this is fate. Each we will keep one. True."

Khaj, Lira, and I stared at each other. Our contracts specified we weren't allowed to keep anything we Collected, but a formal gift like this was a different matter. We were suddenly all very rich.

"Thank you," managed Khaj at last, and Lira and I nodded numbly.

"But one condition," said Flegg, and pointed at me. "You bake us chocolate chip cookies!"

"We don't have any chocolate left," I reminded her. "You ate it all a month ago."

"I has chocolate," Molga said. "Are six kilograms enough?"

"So long as you can keep Flegg away from the mixing bowl," I said.

He nodded his torso, not having a head as such.

"Monkeys must bake, Picassos must dance!" announced Spandrel, and soon they were twirling in a circle around the diamonds.

Molga really did have six kilos of chocolate in his null larder, in the form of a ludicrous giant Easter bunny with its ears gnawed off.

"How come they can eat most of our food and breathe our air?" asked Khaj as we climbed back down to my ship. "I mean, what are the chances?"

"It's around the other way," said Lira, in her snooty lecturing voice again. "Us humans can mostly eat *their* food and breathe *their* air; that's why they employ us. We wouldn't be much good to them if we breathed methane and drank chlorine."

"Flegg told me that's the only reason they bothered to contact Earth," I said. "They were hunting for Artifacts in our galaxy, and noticed that our atmosphere was similar to theirs. They got all excited, thinking that maybe the whole planet was a giant Artifact, and were most disappointed to discover that us funny-looking creatures were the smartest things to ever walk its surface."

"But *how* are we useful to them?" asked Khaj. "You saw Molga back there, Collecting better than anyone. Sure, most of them can't climb for peanuts, but it's obvious they don't really *need* us."

"I think we're just company for them, the same reason my grandfather

on Lagrange Delta keeps a canary," said Lira. "Zooming through space for months on end with no one to talk to would be awfully lonely. I don't know how Molga stands it."

"So then, why don't the four of them fly around *together*?" Khaj insisted. "They're all each other's husbands and wives, aren't they—or did I misunderstand that too?"

"They're a quatrain," I said. "Sort of engaged to be married. Flegg says quatrain members always Collect alone, on the theory that it quadruples their chances of one member finding something big. I guess it worked this time. Now they'll have a big wedding, find a quiet little planet somewhere, and have lots of babies, who'll grow up and start Collecting all over again. Our four will become Traders, the elite social class. They'll win and lose a few fortunes financing their family's Collecting and selling stuff to other alien races, and try their best to die on the holy planet Vlarni-un. It's a life, I suppose. Here's a rolling pin—can you smash that bunny head into little chips, please?"

I got the cookies baking, then started a beef stroganoff. We didn't have a lot of beef or mushrooms left, but rationing seemed pointless now that we'd be heading home soon.

Dinner was chaotic, everyone talking and boasting and dreaming about how to spend their newfound riches.

Orbitals always claimed they'd evolved past the primitive Earthbound concept of personal wealth, but even Lira was excited—bringing back a giant diamond would apparently be quite a status symbol.

Flegg wanted to buy the original of Pablo Picasso's *Woman Dressing Her Hair*.

"A Picasso for a Picasso; it is appropriate, true?" She insisted that she looked like the painting's contorted woman, which none of us believed, especially when she showed us a small dog-eared picture of the painting. She tried posing herself to match, succeeding only in making us laugh.

Khaj was still keen to be a xeno-archaeologist. She tried at length to explain to the Picassos the difference between Collecting and archaeology, but eventually gave up.

As for me, I had no idea what I'd do back on Earth, other than knowing that I'd stay far from Blue Lotus.

"Collector catering, maybe," I suggested. "I'll make a fortune selling chocolate to greedy Picassos."

Everyone agreed this would be a most profitable business.

After dinner, all seven of us climbed up to the next ship, Spandrel's and Khaj's, which had a more up-to-date vid library than anyone else's. It took us twenty minutes to agree on something none of us had seen before but all wanted to watch, and even then the Picassos were only being polite—human drama made no sense to them. The movie being a Malaysian gangster musical probably didn't help. They watched in bewilderment for a while, then left.

Well, it wasn't a great movie. Lira tittered and sniggered and hummed along to all the tunes, but Khaj fell asleep on my shoulder, which was fine by me.

The movie ended. Lira stretched and yawned, winked at me and grinned. "I'll leave you two alone," she stage-whispered and left.

"I'm awake," Khaj said a moment later, her eyes still closed. "I wish I wasn't—I'm tired—but my thumb's throbbing and so's my back. Was she trying to set the two of us up?"

"Probably. So were the Picassos, I think—there were an awful lot of double-entendres in their dinner conversation."

She sighed. "Having sex with someone other than myself would be a nice change after six months, Jayk, but . . ."

"But a broken thumb and a sore back aren't big turn-ons for you?"

"You got it, monkey boy. A very gentle snuggle would be nice though."

So we snuggled on the couch and watched another movie. It was better than the first, but not good enough to stop us both falling asleep partway through.

In the morning she had a fever, which seemed weird. And I had a headache. I went looking for the Picassos, and found them dozing in a tangled heap in Dinali's ship.

"Greetings, human Jayk," said Molga. "I hope you are well."

"I've been better; so has Khaj," I said, and listed our symptoms, just as Flegg had trained me to do.

I'd expected the usual grandmotherly fussing, medical scans, and light-hearted orders for chicken soup, but instead they stared at me in silence.

"Thank you," Flegg said at last. They gave each other a sort of group hug. Not a happy hug, more . . . mutual comfort, perhaps.

"You know what's wrong with Khaj, don't you? I've got it as well, right?"

"You both are fine soon, true," Flegg said, not looking at me. "You are good monkey. Please make breakfast. Pancakes, with final of maple syrup. Please. Thank you."

Sure, whatever. She was lying, but . . . not about us, I thought.

Lira appeared as I was mixing the batter. No, she didn't have a headache or fever, and no, she didn't know what was going on either.

I was about to serve the pancakes when we heard a kerthunk and found the airlock of Molga's ship locked shut, preventing access to his and Dinali's ships. And to all four Picassos and the Artifact.

It stayed locked.

All three of us had been trained as pilots by our Picassos, so naturally we tried accessing the computers. It was soon obvious that Lira knew more about Picasso software design than Khaj and I put together, but even she couldn't get the computers to do more than confirm that life support was operational—all other systems denied us access.

So we ate pancakes and nursed Khaj and worried a lot. Paranoid stuff, like maybe they'd abandoned us here, three hundred light-years from Earth, because they'd changed their minds and wanted to keep all the diamond spheres for themselves. Or maybe monkey sacrifice was part of some secret Picasso religious ritual required for entry to holy Vlamniun. Or they were terrified of catching the flu from Khaj. Not that that last one made any sense, because who could Khaj have caught the flu *from*?

The next day, Khaj and I felt better, but Lira developed a headache and shivered for ten hours, while we continued thinking up stupid conspiracy

theories about what was happening behind that airlock. After a while, one theory sounded less stupid than the others. It involved what we monkeys were here for, and Lira's grandfather's canary. Sort of.

We felt the ship shudder, and gravity faded.

"All four ships are still connected to each other," reported Khaj in relief as she peered out an observation port. "Dinali's ship has disconnected from the Artifact."

The airlock opened.

"We hope you are well." Flegg floated past at speed and disappeared through the next airlock. She sounded odd.

"Come back here," I yelled. "You guys have some explaining to do!"

Spandrel appeared, spun gracefully into her pilot chair, and began what looked to me like a launch sequence.

"Are you going to ignore us too?" Khaj asked.

"Of course she is," I said. "They don't need us any more. We've done our job; we were good little canaries."

Spandrel peered at us with a spare eye while she continued working. "Canaries? Little yellow birds?"

"Yeah, them," said Lira. "In the olden days on Earth, coal miners carried caged canaries into mines. If the air became dangerous, the canaries would collapse first, which gave the miners time to escape. And that's what we are, right? Canaries, not monkeys. You Picassos don't need help. Collecting, you just want a walking early warning system against whatever evil shit was in that Artifact. That's the only reason for all the we-hope-you-are-wells."

Our stomachs lurched as the ships micro-jumped—maneuvering just a fraction of a light-second, probably positioning for a bigger jump. I hadn't known Collector ships could jump while connected together.

"So near and yet so far' I think is human saying, true," said Spandrel. She stroked her control panel and the observation screens flared white, then faded through yellow and orange to black.

"You just blew up the Artifact," said Khaj, sounding as confused as I was.

"True," said Spandrel. "Treasure also. All bad, so bad. We go now to Vlarniun. First deep-jump is being in five minutes. Fasten yourselves."

"Maybe I can get more sense out of Dinali," said Lira, disappearing through the airlock.

Spandrel made an odd whistling sigh and continued programming the jump.

Lira squealed. We followed her, passing Molga, who studiously ignored us, and found Dinali's ship awash with free-floating food packets. Lira looked up at us, pale even for an orbital.

"I found Dinali," she whispered, and pointed to the null larder's transparent door.

Dinali's body filled the larder, which explained all the displaced food. His head was swollen with grey blisters, but he looked peaceful. Not that I'd ever seen a dead Picasso before. He wore his green cashmere socks on all seven limbs. On the larder's control panel, purple lights glowed that I hadn't seen before.

"Three minutes," came Spandrel's voice.

"We'd better strap in," said Khaj.

"Not here," said Lira. "Not this close to him. I couldn't."

"Use my jump couch," said Khaj. "Jayk's is big enough for him and me."

Lira was too upset to even smirk at us.

We made it with thirty seconds to spare, ignored by Molga in her pilot chair. A brief panic when Khaj's stonefoamed hand wouldn't fit through a wrist strap.

"Forget it," she said, checking her other straps. "Let's just hope it's a soft jump. Hey, why'd they leave the treasure on the Artifact? And why are we going to Vlarniun? I thought it was so sacred no one was allowed to live there."

Before I could say I didn't know, we

jumped

several light-years in zero seconds. Our animal brains, stomachs, and bowels shrieked in protest. People have compared it to being hit by a riot police stunstick, and having experienced both, I had to agree.

"Ow, ow, ow!" Khaj said. "Banged my hand and peed myself a bit. You okay?"

"Glad we didn't have time for lunch," I gasped, then called, "Lira, you all right?"

"I'll live," came her shaky voice.

We unstrapped ourselves, climbed out to the main cabin, and found Flegg unconscious. Bubbles of vomit drifted from her eating mouth toward the wall.

"I'll catch the puke," I said. "Tell Spandrel and Molga that Flegg needs them. And ask them very politely to tell us dumb monkeys what the hell's happening. No more lies—we want the real deal."

I expertly scooped the vomit from mid-air into a plastic bag—a skill I'd learned after my first few jumps three years ago—and turned to Flegg. Oh. It wasn't just jump sickness. Two of her arms were lined with tiny grey blisters, and her skin was cold. She twitched and opened some eyes.

"We never lie to you," she wheezed. "We just not . . . tell you some things. We need you, true. Need you now. Please let me . . . breathe my last on Vlarniun."

I said nothing. She looked in no condition to travel, and as far as I knew we were a long long way from Vlarniun.

Spandrel and Molga arrived and stroked Flegg's fingers. Nothing more. They knew she was dying. They didn't look that great themselves.

Khaj and Lira returned, looking scared.

"Time is to tell them," Flegg rasped at Spandrel and Molga.

"You humans call us Picassos," said Spandrel. "A joke, true, ha, for our appearance. True, we mutate most more than you. We live under many cruel skies in many galaxies and must adapt, rapid. So we have many children, all different; some live, most die. Some bodies good for Collecting, others not.

"First human monkeys are that—agile assisting for rich Picassos. Eight years past, call is heard from far-away monkey crying. She say her Picasso is dead, awash in grey blisters. Monkey she is fine. Picasso has what we name Grey Death. It try, but cannot kill monkey, just as with you yesterday.

"Some Artifacts contaminated with the Grey Death. It destroy our third empire five thousand generations ago, we think. No cure, no treatment of we know, even no symptoms until death hovers."

"Okay, so humans are immune," Khaj said. "How does that help *you*?"

"Do not interrupting," Spandrel scolded. "Grey Death attack quickly, no time for we travel to Vlarniun. Unless we warned early. You understand now? *That* why we have monkeys. Canary birds perhaps, but not as you think, no."

"I still say is cowardly," said Molga. "I am old-fashioned, true, I say we should die as our ancestors do, not protected by monkeys. My beloveds disagree, employ you. I respect, not argue them."

"But in that case," Lira said, sounding exasperated, "why have we only just left the Artifact? What were you doing all that time? And what's the point of putting Dinali in the larder?"

"We four are wedding," said Spandrel. "To us, wedding ceremony a most private thing. Now we must make Dinali breathe last breath on Vlarniun—null field is only way."

"What?" I said. "He's still alive in there?"

"Of course not. Field kill instantly. But we activate field as he breathe in. So you arrive on Vlarniun, you deactivate field—and his body breathe out for final time. You do same for us each, please. We all four breathe out last breaths on Vlarniun."

"Not I," said Molga stubbornly. "I die natural at Vlarniun or no."

Flegg faded fast. I busied myself moving all the food from our larder to Spandrel's. I followed instructions to disable the larder's safety locks, then helped carry Flegg there.

"Goodbye, monkey boy," were Flegg's very last words. She breathed in, I activated the null field, then cried for two hours.

A day later, Molga changed his mind, and we did the same for him.

"Tradition die hard," were his last words.

"You're not allowed to die," I told Spandrel. "Yours is the only null larder left, and I'm not throwing away all that good food just to squeeze you in there."

And she didn't die. Grey blisters came and went, and she vomited and shat through every deep-jump. She told us many times she wished to die, but somehow didn't. She slowly got better.

"I am alive, some immune," she shrilled, slurping chicken soup via another mouth. "The joy of mutation, true, true. Perhaps our babies also are immune, some at least. They make fine Collectors, true—will be famous."

"You're pregnant?" I asked.

"Of course, true. Do you humans not mate at weddings?"

Assuming I didn't make another navigation error, our next deep-jump takes us to Vlarniun. Dinali, Flegg, and Molga will all breathe out one last time under the Vlarniun sky, surrounded by thousands of years of ancestors.

Then Spandrel, Khaj, Lira and I will dance for them, dance in circles for hours.

That's what Collectors do for each other. ○

THE COMPASS

Edd Vick

Since he last appeared in our February issue with "Parachute Kid," Edd Vick has found his time dominated by MU Press/AEON, his comic book publishing company. *Bugtown*, a major new series by Matt Howarth, has just completed its six-issue run. Edd is also in negotiations to write a graphic novel based on a much-loved animated science fiction show. He tells us that if you visit the Comicon International in San Diego this summer, be sure to stop by MU's booth and say, "Hi."

A word of warning: there are brief scenes in the following story that may be disturbing to some readers.

The skippership *Hope* glided below the surface of reality.

Mara entered the navigator's cubby. It was situated in the exact center of the giant metal pyramid that carried them through skipspace, and its mismatched components and tangles of cables lent a makeshift quality to it. Some of its devices still communicated by wire.

"Hello, Brendan," Mara said to the navigational instrument, checking his nutrient flow and making sure he had not kinked his tube. "How has he been?" she asked Burke, the navigator, while running a diagnostic on the ocular camera that tracked the fetus's eye movements while in skip.

"Fine, fine," said Burke. "He's been pretty active." He pointed at Brendan's tiny hand, blue-veined and gently waving in the fluid of the tank. The fetus kicked, and Burke darted a look at his panel. "We're about to go norm, I think."

Mara had not been in the room during transition to normspace. "Does he always kick?"

"Usually, not always. It's a good indicator." The navigator sat at his console, studying his screen. "Yes, we're transitioning."

A camera beeped insistently behind her, and she moved aside. It refocused on the tank and its occupant. The fetus turned his head, sealed eyes questing, and the entire tank moved on its gimbals in the same direction. This continued until the fetus was facing the wall to Mara's left. She glanced at Burke's screen, all numbers and quasar names with magnitudes and frequencies, to be checked against normspace after the transition. Then she moved to the tank's side, careful not to get in the way of the camera, and sighted over the fetus's head. He was looking directly at the skipspace analogue to where the Earth had once been.

There were no guideposts in skipspace: no stars, no black holes or quasars. Brendan was their only usable instrument.

Mara refocused her eyes, catching her reflection in the tank's side. Her short crinkly mop of hair was liberally sprinkled with white, and she saw new wrinkles in the dark skin around her eyes. There was more weight around her middle, too. Forty-five, she thought. That's not *too* old. "How does he know?" Mara said quietly.

The screens around them came to life, displaying star patterns. They were back in normspace, many light years from the location where they'd gone skip.

"It's not about 'knowing.' He just has an instinct," the navigator said. "We didn't even know about it until a pregnant woman was off Earth. If only we could bottle it." His screen was narrowing possibilities down, based on the tank's orientation.

"We have." But that was too quiet for Burke to hear, and she bent once more to her own instruments, monitoring the fetus's health.

The fetus was almost used up, but she'd known that as soon as she had seen one eyelid open slightly.

Dorrie stood at the railing, looking out at the sea of coffin-shaped cryoboxes that constituted one level of the *Hope*. This one level alone held three thousand empty chambers, and it was only a third the size of the largest level. Only the two top floors were occupied; they'd managed to save eight hundred station personnel when the pebbles had struck.

Dear Lord, she prayed, please watch over us. We're all that's left, Lord. You hold our souls in the palm of your hand. Please let us find a habitable planet, if it be your will. Amen.

She turned back to checking the miles of piping that ran along the catwalks and corridors of her ship-home. The constant ozone tang to the ship's air was most concentrated here. She climbed down a set of rungs to another gallery of cryoboxes. She always found Level 15 intimidating, almost haunted. Just as they were transitioning into skipspace, a pebble like the trillion or so that had destroyed the Earth had slammed into the *Hope* at near-relativistic speed, shredding crew and cryoboxes, and spurring their decision to leave. Theirs had been the only one of five skipperhips to make it away from Earth before the pebblestorm had increased exponentially. Repairs had been makeshift, but she found them holding. She moved onward, upward, toward one of the ship's four tips.

Three more levels today, she thought. Then I can meet Bruce near the

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screen and have lunch. Mustn't forget to inspect the hydroponics pumps later.

Her board gonged. She tapped its screen. It reminded her that a meeting was scheduled for fifteen hundred hours. If she hurried, she would be able to finish the remaining levels on her list first.

Mara got to the meeting early. She slipped into a seat, nodding to a couple of friends. The entire crew was in the room, excepting a few at vital posts who were listening in.

Captain Ashok Chaphalkar already stood under the large reader board that spelled out "Day 84." The lights dimmed and his face appeared on the screen for them all to see.

"Shipmates," he said. "Welcome, and thank you for coming. Your patience is appreciated. I realize we were all hoping to be off the *Hope* and on a new planet by now. Top item on the agenda is to inform you that we are progressing well toward the star HD 82943. Our visits to Upsilon Andromedae and HD 142 were unsuccessful, but we have high hopes for this star. Like 142, it has five detected planets. Gross location is done and we are well into fine location. We expect to be close enough to view earthlike planets within the next two to three transitions. There is a problem with that, though. Doctor N'Dongo? Where are you, Mara?"

Mara's face appeared on the screen. She stood, the distant camera smoothly tracking her face. She spoke in a normal tone of voice, trusting the AI's ability to read her lips and broadcast what she said. It interpreted her expression and analyzed her body language to lend her speech nuance. No microphone necessary, though the emotions surprised her at times with their accuracy.

"Hello." A computer simulation of her voice said, almost with her. "One of my tasks is to monitor the health of the fetus we must use as an aid to navigation. Its instinct to face Earth fades as its eyes open during week twenty-five or thereabouts. I am sorry to say that it will soon be too old. We have no substitute fetus available, due to our rapid departure from Earth."

"Thank you, doctor. Perhaps you would let us know if any of the crew—qualifies?" His voice was honey.

It was important, damn important, that they have a substitute. But no way was she going to be his lighting rod. She said, "I'm afraid that's covered by patient confidentiality." She sat down.

"We'll discuss that later. Meanwhile, I'm certain we will hear from any of our crew who might be pregnant." He looked down at the board he held. "Related topic. Doctor Reynolds has a theory about narrowing our search. Gene?"

A helioseismologist rose from his second row seat and launched into a description of orbital mechanics. The lipreader could barely follow it, evidently baffled by his mumbling into his beard. Mara looked across a sea of heads, the cream of Earth's scientific and technical knowledge, and sighed. The lottery for crew of the *Hope* had been impartial, but their emergency departure had left her with the crew of the space station *Parsifal*, where the *Hope* had been built. There were certainly a lot of old white men in the

room. The lottery for cryopassage had been likewise equitable, but instead they had wound up with more stationers. A fist of loneliness tightened around her heart. Lord, but she missed Robert, lost behind with Earth.

A flashing red light on her board drew her attention. She had muted it for the meeting, but had left its screen on. A single glance was enough; she stood and excused herself, and was running by the time she hit the door.

Dorrie, sitting next to Bruce on the unadorned bench, barely noticed the older woman leave, so rapt was she by Doctor Reynolds's theory. It was based on the gross jumps they'd been making through skipspace. All points in the universe were contiguous to points in skipspace, which had a radius of only a few dozen miles. The ship entered normspace and remained motionless while Burke located his quasars, then went skip and moved its precise few nanometers, which translated to dozens, hundreds of lightyears in norm. Brendan was their only way to tell their orientation when skipping.

They had to regulate their velocity carefully when going skip, so as not to wind up in the dark between galaxies. Reynolds suggested making wilder skips if 82943 didn't pan out, longer ones, based on calculations he'd made during their journey so far. He expected to be able to lead them to nearby galaxies, younger ones with more viable systems.

When Reynolds was finished, Dorrie's superior rose and reported on the *Hope's* condition and supply situation. She thought he was being optimistic to peg it at another forty days' travel, but hoped he was right. She'd do her best to ensure it.

Captain Chaphalkar announced two more marriages. Dorrie squeezed her husband's hand. Shipboard romances had blossomed. She thanked God for Bruce, whom she'd married only a week into the journey.

There was a subtle movement inside her, the baby maybe stretching its legs. She straightened her back and rolled her neck in sympathy.

The doctor returned. She entered from the wings of the stage where the captain stood, and went to him. They conferred in private for a moment, then he turned back to the podium.

"I am informed that the—the fetus has just died. I'd like to call for a prayer."

Reverend Thorpe rose, and the screen focused on his face. Dorrie lowered her head, but, as she always did, she opened her eyes halfway through the prayer. She liked to watch men as they prayed. Thorpe's face was reverent; the AI altering his nasal twang to a deeper, calming baritone. Then Dorrie's gaze slid down, right, and she locked gazes with Doctor Tamara N'Dongo. The woman was too far away to make out her expression, but Dorrie felt uneasy. Her husband and her doctor were the only ones who knew she was pregnant.

Mara pulled off both rubber gloves and tossed them in the general direction of the recycler. Then she leaned on the sides of the sink, its plastic cool to her touch, and leaned forward. Farther, farther, and the water streaming from the tap kissed the top of her head. She stayed in position

for a moment and then straightened to let the water cascade down to her shoulders, her back, her chest.

For such a small being, the autopsy had been long and grueling. She'd had to be painstaking.

Mara's board signaled. She tapped it, and the captain's voice spoke.

"Tamara? You are done?"

"Yes," she said. "He died of natural causes, an infection. They can be very quick to act in someone so young. Fetuses aren't meant to be outside their natural environment." She remembered Brendan's mother, tearfully thanking the Captain for taking her and her child to Heaven. Wren Adamson had been passing through Level 15 when the pebble had hit the *Hope*, vaporizing her. Brendan was already in his navigational bubble by then.

"Thank you. So, doctor—" There it was again, that honeyed tone, almost exactly like the one synthesized by the lipreader. "Now it's just the two of us, I'd like to know what likely candidates we have aboard."

Just the two of us, she thought. Aloud, she said, "I'm not altering my stance just because we're alone, Captain. My patients have their right to privacy."

"Not when it comes to the survival of this ship and the entire human race. You have no moral high ground here, Mara."

"That won't change my opinion. But . . . let me talk to the mother, see if she'll come forward on her own."

"You have two hours. But that's all."

It was Dorrie's turn to make breakfast. She was setting the table for herself and Bruce when the buzzer at their door sounded. She put a napkin down and answered it. The dimness outside the door was mute witness to it still being "night" for crew on their level. A deeper darkness resolved into the ship's doctor, Tamara N'Dongo, dressed in a gray cloak over clothes that turned out to be a riot of greens and yellows when she swept it off. She stepped in at Dorrie's invitation and put the cloak on a nearby chair. She saw Dorrie looking at it.

"That's a buibui," she said. "A traveling cloak."

"Oh. Is it raining?"

N'Dongo laughed. "Just an old habit." Then she frowned and added, "I may turn out to be the last person ever to use one or know what it is."

"Not now, so long as I'm around. Won't you sit down? I have some juice, or coffee."

"Juice? Orange juice?" She sniffed the air.

Dorrie showed the doctor to the table with its two settings, and offered Bruce's glass to Mara. Then she sat at her own place. The silence stretched. Dorrie heard her husband yawn from the other room, and hoped he'd put on a robe before coming to the table. She was just thinking she ought to go to the door and let him know she wasn't alone when the doctor spoke.

"Dorothy, you heard the announcement this morning."

"Yes, such a poor baby."

"Yes. Yes, it was. We can't go skip until he's . . . replaced."

"Mm. Toast?"

"No. Thank you. Dorothy, you—ah, you have a baby. Just over ten weeks old."

"You can't have my baby."

"Ten weeks is the right age for using it. As an instrument. As—"

"I know." Dorrie began tearing her toast into small pieces. "Isn't there something else? Some other way? Somebody else pregnant?"

"No one the right age. The fetus needs to be at least seven weeks old, so that the eyes have sealed and its brain is developed enough for the instinct to initiate. You're the one match I have."

"No."

"You'd hardly be giving your baby up. You'd be able to visit it every day, if you wanted. And once it reaches twenty-five weeks old and the eyes unseal again, you'd be able to have it back, in an incubator."

"No," said Dorrie. "Baby Brendan died. My baby could, too. Aren't you supposed to refuse to perform unnecessary procedures?"

"The procedure is—almost perfect, it's all handled by an autodoc anyway. And it's absolutely necessary. Dorothy—Dorrie, you must understand how important—"

"Maybe you could use one of those cameras. What are they called, the ones that look inside you. Couldn't you watch my baby while it's still inside me?"

"An endoscope. No, it wouldn't be accurate enough. And besides, it'd probably cause a miscarriage."

"Maybe one of the cryos?"

"What?" The doctor sipped her juice, her glass clattering a bit when she set it back on the table. Dorrie wondered if the doctor was as upset as she to be in this conversation.

"The cryos? Do any of them have a fetus the right age?" she prompted.

"Seventy percent of the stationers were male," said the doctor. She looked Dorrie straight in the eye. "Won't you consider coming forward? The future of the human race—" She stopped and snorted. "I'm sorry, I have trouble getting through that, even if it's true. Listen, the captain will make me tell him about you, anyway. It's out of my hands. I just wanted to give you the chance to come forward first."

Dorrie was quiet, listening to her husband's breathing, feeling internally for her child to remind her of its existence. The doctor rose and retrieved her cloak, and Dorrie got up to see her to the door.

"There's not much time."

"You've already got my answer," said Dorrie. She closed the door.

She walked back to the table and picked up the empty juice glass.

It was Sunday. Mara stood alone and nude in her tiny examination room. Most of the crew would be in front of the screen at Worship listening to Reverend Thorpe. Try as she might, she just couldn't subscribe to their belief that skip-space was Heaven.

She'd checked twice that the door was locked. She checked it again.

Lying down on the examination table, she wheeled the portadoc unit closer and centered its bulbous sensor array over her abdomen. The machine made a subtle whoop-whoop sound and extended one of its wands

to touch her belly. The doc's screen flickered to life, giving her a color-coded three-dimensional picture of her inner anatomy. She automatically catalogued the things she saw. Bladder. Fallopian tube. Womb. And there it was.

Her baby. Her thirteen-week-old, four-inch-long miracle. Robert's last gift, implanted in a body she had thought too old to be fertile.

She lay there on her back, knees up and spread, and watched her child's heart beating. Her breathing slowed and she thought she might easily go to sleep here. Just watching.

Across the room, her board gonged. Reluctantly, she powered the doc down and hopped awkwardly off the table to look at her screen.

There was a text message, private, from the captain. *Schedule operation*, it said. *Dorothy Canigher has volunteered to donate her fetus.*

The operation was textbook-perfect. The autodoc put Dorothy Canigher to sleep and flooded its arena with oxyfluid, just as if she were going cryo. She took a shallow breath every thirty seconds, and her sluggish circulation discouraged blood loss. The machine made its infraumbilical incision and entered her peritoneal cavity, then incised her uterus. It pulled the fetus out with care and transferred it to the sealed environment where it would stay until it could be transferred to an incubator. Then it closed Dorrie, drained its arena, and delivered her up to Bruce Canigher and Captain Chaphalkar. They put her to bed. Bruce sat beside her, prepared, he said, to wait the night.

Mara breathed easier once both of her patients were safe. She joined her captain in looking at the fetus in its tank.

"What a perfect little thing," he said. "Look at those hands."

She messaged Burke, the navigator, that she would keep both mother and child for twenty-four hours' observation. The *Hope* could be on its way in a day.

Then she walked to her examination room. She wanted to stay near both patients.

In Dorrie's dream, a perfect little girl with blonde pigtails, dressed in a white pinafore, came to her and pulled at her hand until she followed. Gray ship walls fell away and became a field of bluebonnets, so like the ones she'd played in when she was young. The girl led her to a dollhouse in the center of the field, looked at Dorrie, and put a finger to her lips.

"We have to be quiet," whispered the girl. "We don't want to wake God up." Then she fell to her knees next to the little house, and so did Dorrie.

The girl reached out and lifted the roof off of the house.

"Hello, Doctor."

Mara lifted her head off the small desk. "Captain," she said. She'd only meant to close her eyes for a moment. She glanced toward her computer screen, with its array of monitor results. "Dorothy is doing fine."

"And the fetus?"

Mara brought up her other patient's results. "It's—she—is doing well."

"Thank you. I just wanted to be sure before I make an announcement

tomorrow." The captain dropped a stack of flimsies onto her desk. "I found these in your examination room. Tell me, what are they?"

Mara's heart beat faster and she could hear the blood rushing in her head. "Printouts," she said. "Ultrasound printouts."

"Mm. This top one is dated yesterday."

"It's normal to do an ultrasound before a caesarean."

"I'm not an expert at reading these things, but this looks like a nail on its finger." He pointed at a section of one of the flimsies. "Does this look like a fingernail to you?"

She didn't have to look. "Yes," she said, staring into his face.

"I don't recall seeing any fingernails on the Canigher baby. Don't they develop later than ten weeks? By the way, what month does a baby start showing on a pregnant woman?" He looked pointedly at her belly.

"I couldn't—I just couldn't let him go."

"Have you made any plans at all for when people find out? When Dorrie and Bruce find out?"

"—I couldn't—"

"What if their baby dies?" Chaphalkar set the flimsy back down. "Will you be prepared to donate your fetus then?" His eyes were hard and demanding, so like the brittleness of his voice. "We'll be near enough to HD 82943 tomorrow. Near enough to know whether we can settle on one of its planets."

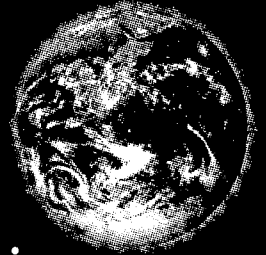
His voice was honey no longer.

Mara looked away, down into her folded arms. The baby moved under them, protesting the pressure. ○

EARTH OF MERCY

It is to Earth we turn
for only there do we find
the mercy of refuge
from our icy holds
in the dark of space.
We carry our Earth dreams
of warmth, beauty, and abundance
with us, never satisfied,
using them against the void
to keep our tenuous holds
in those dark places
we now call home.

—Roger Dutcher



GIRLS AND BOYS, COME OUT TO PLAY

Michael Swanwick

Our August science fiction cover story takes place in Arcadia, replete with Dionysus, satyrs, nymphs, and the author's well-known scoundrels—Darger and Surplus. Michael has won Hugos five out of the past six years. Four of these were for stories that appeared in *Asimov's* and the other was for a story in our sister magazine, *Analog*. One Hugo was for "The Dog Said Bow-Wow" (October/November 2001), the first story about his charming rascals.

On a hilltop in Arcadia, Darger sat talking with a satyr.

"Oh, the sex is good," the satyr said. "Nobody could say it wasn't. But is it the be-all and end-all of life? I don't see that." The satyr's name was Demetrios Papatragos, and evenings he played the saxophone in a local jazz club.

"You're a bit of a philosopher," Darger observed.

"Oh, well, in a home-grown front porch sense, I suppose I am." The satyr adjusted the small leather apron that was his only item of clothing. "But enough about me. What brings *you* here? We don't get that many travelers these days. Other than the African scientists, of course."

"Of course. What *are* the Africans here for, anyway?"

"They are building gods."

"Gods! Surely not! Whatever for?"

"Who can fathom the ways of scientists? All the way from Greater Zimbabwe they came, across the wine-dark Mediterranean and into these romance-haunted hills, and for what? To lock themselves up within the ruins of the Monastery of St. Vasilios, where they labor as diligently and

joylessly as if they were indeed monks. They never come out, save to buy food and wine or to take the occasional blood sample or skin scraping. Once, one of them offered a nymph money to have sex with him, if you can believe such a thing."

"Scandalous!" Nymphs, though they were female satyrs, had neither hooves nor horns. They were, however, not cross-fertile with humans. It was the only way, other than a small tail at the base of their spines (and *that* was normally covered by their dresses), to determine their race. Needless to say, they were as wildly popular with human men as their male counterparts were with women. "Sex is either freely given or it is nothing."

"You're a bit of a philosopher yourself," Papatragos said. "Say—a few of our young ladies might be in heat. You want me to ask around?"

"My good friend Surplus, perhaps, would avail himself of their kind offers. But not I. Much though I'd enjoy the act, I'd only feel guilty afterwards. It is one of the drawbacks of having a depressive turn of mind."

So Darger made his farewells, picked up his walking stick, and sauntered back to town. The conversation had given him much to think about.

"What word of the Evangelos bronzes?" Surplus asked. He was sitting at a table out back of their inn, nursing a small glass of retsina and admiring the sunset. The inn stood at the outskirts of town at the verge of a forest, where pine, fir, and chestnut gave way to orchards, olive trees, cultivated fields, and pastures for sheep and goats. The view from its garden could scarce be improved upon.

"None whatsoever. The locals are happy to recommend the ruins of this amphitheater or that nuclear power plant, but any mention of bronze lions or a metal man causes them only to look blank and shake their heads in confusion. I begin to suspect that scholar in Athens sold us a bill of goods."

"The biters bit! Well, 'tis an occupational hazard in our line of business."

"Sadly true. Still, if the bronzes will not serve us in one manner, they shall in another. Does it not strike you as odd that two such avid antiquarians as ourselves have yet to see the ruins of St. Vasilios? I propose that tomorrow we pay a courtesy visit upon the scientists there."

Surplus grinned like a hound—which he was not, quite. He shook out his lace cuffs and, seizing his silver-knobbed cane, stood. "I look forward to making their acquaintance."

"The locals say that they are building gods."

"Are they really? Well, there's a market for everything, I suppose."

Their plans were to take a strange turn, however. For that evening Dionysus danced through the town.

Darger was writing a melancholy letter home when the first shouts sounded outside his room. He heard cries of "Pan! Great Pan!" and wild skirls of music. Going to the window, he saw an astonishing sight: The townsfolk were pouring into the street, shedding their clothes, dancing naked in the moonlight for all to see. At their head was a tall, dark figure who pranced and leaped, all the while playing the pipes.

He got only a glimpse, but its effect was riveting. He *felt* the god's passage as a physical thing. Stiffening, he gripped the windowsill with both

hands, and tried to control the wildness that made his heart pound and his body quiver.

But then two young women, one a nymph and the other Theodosia, the innkeeper's daughter, burst into his room and began kissing his face and urging him toward the bed.

Under normal circumstances, he would have sent them packing—he hardly knew the ladies. But the innkeeper's daughter and her goat-girl companion were both laughing and blushing so charmingly and were furthermore so eager to grapple that it seemed a pity to disappoint them. Then, too, the night was rapidly filling with the sighs and groans of human passion—no adult, apparently, was immune to the god's influence—and it seemed to Darger perverse that he alone in all the world should refuse to give in to pleasure.

So, protesting insincerely, he allowed the women to crowd him back onto the bed, to remove his clothing, and to have their wicked way with him. Nor was he backwards with them. Having once set his mind to a task, he labored at it with a will.

In a distant corner of his mind, he heard Surplus in the room down the hall raise his voice in an ecstatic howl.

Darger slept late the next morning. When he went down to breakfast, Theodosia was all blushes and shy smiles. She brought him a platter piled high with food, gave him a fleet peck on the cheek, and then fled happily back into the kitchen.

Women never ceased to amaze Darger. One might make free of their bodies in the most intimate manner possible, handling them not only lustfully but self-indulgently, and denying oneself not a single pleasure . . . yet it only made them like you the better afterwards. Darger was a staunch atheist. He did not believe in the existence of a benevolent and loving God who manipulated the world in order to maximize the happiness of His creations. Still, on a morning like this, he had to admit that all the evidence was against him.

Through an open doorway, he saw the landlord make a playful grab at his fat wife's rump. She pushed him away and, with a giggle, fled into the interior of the inn. The landlord followed.

Darger scowled. He gathered his hat and walking stick, and went outside. Surplus was waiting in the garden. "Your thoughts trend the same way as mine?" Darger asked.

"Where else could they go?" Surplus asked grimly. "We must have a word with the Africans."

The monastery was less than a mile distant, but the stroll up and down dusty country roads gave them both time enough to recover their *savoir faire*. St. Vasilios, when they came to it, was dominated by a translucent green bubble-roof, fresh-grown to render the ruins habitable. The grounds were surrounded by an ancient stone wall. A wooden gate, latched but not locked, filled the lower half of a stone arch. Above it was a bell.

They rang.

Several orange-robed men were in the yard, unloading crated laboratory equipment from a wagon. They had the appearance and the formidable

height of that handsomest of the world's peoples, the Masai. But whether they were of Masai descent or had merely incorporated Masai features into their genes, Darger could not say. The stocky, sweating wagoner looked like a gnome beside them. He cursed and tugged at his horses' harness to keep the skittish beasts from bolting.

At the sound of the bell, one of the scientists separated himself from the others, and strode briskly to the gate. "Yes?" he said in a dubious tone.

"We wish to speak with the god Pan," Darger said. "We are from the government."

"You do not look Greek."

"Not the local government, sir. The *British* government." Darger smiled into the man's baffled expression. "May we come in?"

They were not brought to see Dionysus immediately, of course, but to the Chief Researcher. The scientist-monk led them to an office that was almost Spartan in its appointments: a chair, a desk, a lamp, and nothing more. Behind the desk sat a girl who looked to be at most ten years old, reading a report by the lamp's gentle biofluorescence. She was a scrawny thing with a large and tightly corn-rowed head. "Tell her you love her," she said curtly.

"I beg your pardon?" Surplus said.

"Tell her that, and then kiss her. That'll work better than any aphrodisiac I could give you. I presume that's what you came to this den of scientists for—that or poison. In which case, I recommend a stout cudgel at midnight and dumping the body in a marsh before daybreak. Poisons are notoriously uncertain. In either case, there is no need to involve my people in your personal affairs."

Taken aback, Darger said, "Ah, actually, we are here on official business."

The girl raised her head.

Her eyes were as dark and motionless as a snake's. They were not the eyes of a child but more like those of the legendary artificial intellects of the Utopian era—cold, timeless, calculating. A shudder ran through Darger's body. Her gaze was electrifying. Almost, it was terrifying.

Recovering himself, Darger said, "I am Inspector Darger, and this is my colleague, Sir Blackthorpe Ravenscain de Plus Precieux. By birth an American, it goes without saying."

She did not blink. "What brings two representatives of Her Majesty's government here?"

"We have been dispatched to search out and recover the Evangelos bronzes. Doubtless you know of them."

"Vaguely. They were liberated from London, were they not?"

"Looted, rather! Wrenched from Britain's loving arms by that dastard Konstantin Evangelos in an age when she was weak and Greece powerful, and upon the shoddiest of excuses—something about some ancient marbles that had supposedly . . . well, that hardly matters."

"Our mission is to find and recover them," Surplus elucidated.

"They must be valuable."

"Were you to discover them, they would be worth a king's ransom, and

it would be my proud privilege to write you a promissory note for the full amount. However—" Darger coughed into his hand. "We, of course, are civil servants. The thanks of a grateful nation will be our reward."

"I see." Abruptly changing the subject, the Chief Researcher said, "Your friend—is he a chimeric mixture of human and animal genes, like the satyrs? Or is he a genetically modified dog? I ask only out of professional curiosity."

"His friend is capable of answering your questions for himself," Surplus said coldly. "There is no need to speak of him as if he were not present. I mention this only as a point of common courtesy. I realize that you are young, but—"

"I am older than you think, sirrah!" the girl-woman snapped. "There are disadvantages to having a childish body, but it heals quickly, and my brain cells—in stark contrast to your own, gentlemen—continually replenish themselves. A useful quality in a researcher." Her voice was utterly without warmth, but compelling nonetheless. She radiated a dark aura of authority. "Why do you wish to meet our Pan?"

"You have said it yourself—out of professional curiosity. We are government agents, and therefore interested in any new products Her Majesty might be pleased to consider."

The Chief Researcher stood. "I am not at all convinced that the Scientifically Rational Government of Greater Zimbabwe will want to export this technology after it has been tested and perfected. However, odder things have happened. So I will humor you. You must wear these patches, as do we." The Chief Researcher took two plastic bandages from a nearby box and showed how they should be applied. "Otherwise, you would be susceptible to the god's influence."

Darger noted how, when the chemicals from the drug-patch hit his bloodstream, the Chief Researcher's bleak charisma distinctly faded. These patches were, he decided, useful things indeed.

The Chief Researcher opened the office door, and cried, "Bast!"

The scientist who had led them in stood waiting outside. But it was not he who was summoned. Rather, there came the soft sound of heavy paws on stone, and a black panther stalked into the office. It glanced at Darger and Surplus with cool intelligence, then turned to the Chief Researcher. "Ssssssooooo. . . ?"

"Kneel!" The Chief Researcher climbed onto the beast's back, commenting off-handedly, "These tiny legs make walking long distances tiresome." To the waiting scientist she said, "Light the way for us."

Taking a thurible from a nearby hook, the scientist led them down a labyrinthine series of halls and stairways, proceeding ever deeper into the earth. He swung the thurible at the end of its chain as he went, and the chemical triggers it released into the air activated the moss growing on the stone walls and ceiling so that they glowed brightly before them, and gently faded behind them.

It was like a ceremony from some forgotten religion, Darger reflected. First came the thurifer, swinging his censer with a pleasant near-regular clanking, then the dwarfish lady on her great cat, followed by the two congegants, one fully human and the other possessed of the head and other

tokens of the noble dog. He could easily picture the scene painted upon an interior wall of an ancient pyramid. The fact that they were going to converse with a god only made the conceit that much more apt.

At last the passage opened into their destination.

It was a scene out of Piranesi. The laboratory had been retrofitted into the deepest basement of the monastery. The floors and roofs above had fallen in long ago, leaving shattered walls, topless pillars, and fragmentary buttresses. Sickly green light filtered through the translucent dome overhead, impeded by the many tendrils or roots that descended from above to anchor the dome by wrapping themselves about toppled stones or columnar stumps. There was a complexity of structure to the growths that made Darger feel as though he were standing within a monstrous jellyfish, or else one of those man-created beasts which, ages ago (or so legend had it), the Utopians had launched into the void between the stars in the hope that, eons hence, they might make contact with alien civilizations.

Scientists moved purposefully through the gloom, feeding mice to their organic alembics and sprinkling nutrients into pulsing bioreactors. Everywhere, ungainly tangles of booms and cranes rose up from the floor or stuck out from high perches on the walls. Two limbs from the nearest dipped delicately downward, as if in curiosity. They moved in a strangely fluid manner.

"Oh, dear God!" Surplus cried.

Darger gaped and, all in an instant, the groping booms and cranes revealed themselves as tentacles. The round blobs they had taken at first for bases became living flesh. Eyes as large as dinner plates clicked open and focused on the two adventurers.

His senses reeled. Squids! And by his quick estimation, there were, at a minimum, several score of the creatures!

The Chief Researcher slid off her feline mount, and waved the inquiring tentacles away. "Remove Experiment One from its crypt," she commanded, and the creature flowed across the wall to do her bidding. It held itself upon the vertical surface by its suckered tentacles, Darger noted, but scuttled along the stone on short sharp legs like those of a hermit crab's. He understood now why the Chief Researcher was so interested in chimeras.

In very little time, two squids came skittering across the floor, a stone coffin in their conjoined tentacles. Gracefully, they laid it down. In unison, they raised their tentacles and lowered them in a grotesque imitation of a bow. Their beaks clacked repeatedly.

"They are intelligent creatures," the Chief Researcher commented. "But no great conversationalists."

To help regain his equilibrium, Darger fumbled out his pipe from a jacket pocket, and his tobacco pouch and a striking-box as well. But at the sight of this latter device, the squids squealed in alarm. Tentacles thrashing, they retreated several yards.

The Chief Researcher rounded on Darger. "*Put that thing away!*" Then, in a calmer tone, "We tolerate no open flames. The dome is a glycerol-based organism. It could go up at a spark."

Darger complied. But, true though the observation about the dome might be, he knew a lie when he heard one. So the creatures feared fire! That might be worth remembering.

"You wanted to meet Dionysus." The Chief Researcher laid a hand on the coffin. "He is here. Subordinate Researcher Mbutu, open it up."

Surplus raised his eyebrows, but said nothing.

The scientist pried open the coffin lid. For an instant nothing was visible within but darkness. Then a thousand black beetles poured from the coffin (both Darger and Surplus shuddered at the uncanniness of it) and fled into the shadows, revealing a naked man who sat up, blinking, as if just awakened.

"Behold the god."

Dionysus was an enormous man, easily seven feet tall when he stood and proportionately built, though he projected no sense of power at all. His head was either bald or shaven but in either case perfectly hairless. The scientist handed him a simple brown robe, and when he tied it up with a length of rope, he looked as if he were indeed a monk.

The panther, Bast, sat licking one enormous paw, ignoring the god entirely.

When Darger introduced himself and Surplus, Dionysus smiled weakly and reached out a trembling hand to shake. "It is very pleasant to meet folks from England," he said. "I have so few visitors." His brow was damp with sweat and his skin a pallid grey.

"This man is sick!" Darger said.

"It is but weariness from the other night. He needs more time with the physician scarabs to replenish his physical systems," the Chief Researcher said impatiently. "Ask your questions."

Surplus placed a paw on the god's shoulder. "You look unhappy, my friend."

"I—"

"Not to *him*," the dwarfish woman snapped, "to *me*! He is a proprietary creation and thus not qualified to comment upon himself."

"Very well," Darger said. "To begin, madam—why? You have made a god, I presume by so manipulating his endocrine system that he produces massive amounts of targeted pheromones on demand. But what is the point?"

"If you were in town last night, you must know what the point is. Dionysus will be used by the Scientifically Rational Government to reward its people with festivals in times of peace and prosperity as a reward for their good citizenship, and in times of unrest as a pacifying influence. He may also be useful in quelling riots. We shall see."

"I note that you referred to this man as Experiment One. May I presume you are building more gods?"

"Our work progresses well. More than that I cannot say."

"Perhaps you are also building an Athena, goddess of wisdom?"

"Wisdom, as you surely know, being a matter of pure reason, cannot be produced by the application of pheromones."

"No? Then a Ceres, goddess of the harvest? Or an Hephaestus, god of the forge? Possibly a Hestia, goddess of the hearth?"

The girl-woman shrugged. "By the tone of your questions, you know the answers already. Pheromones cannot compel skills, virtues, or abstractions—only emotions."

"Then reassure me, madam, that you are not building a Nemesis, goddess of revenge? Nor an Eris, goddess of discord. Nor an Ares, god of war. Nor a Thanatos, god of death. For if you were, the only reason I can imagine for your presence here would be that you did not care to test them out upon your own population."

The Chief Researcher did not smile. "You are quick on the uptake for an European."

"Young societies are prone to presume that simply because a culture is old, it must therefore be decadent. Yet it is not we who are running experiments upon innocent people without their knowledge or consent."

"I do not think of Europeans as people. Which I find takes care of any ethical dilemmas."

Darger's hand whitened on the knob of his cane. "Then I fear, madam, that our interview is over."

On the way out, Surplus accidentally knocked over a beaker. In the attendant confusion, Darger was able to surreptitiously slip a box of the anti-pheromonal patches under his coat. There was no obvious immediate use for the things. But from long experience, they both knew that such precautions often prove useful.

The journey back to town was slower and more thoughtful than the journey out had been. Surplus broke the silence at last by saying, "The Chief Researcher did not rise to the bait."

"Indeed. And I could not have been any more obvious. I as good as told her that we knew where the bronzes were, and were amenable to being bribed."

"It makes one wonder," Surplus said, "if our chosen profession is not, essentially, sexual in nature."

"How so?"

"The parallels between cozening and seduction are obvious. One presents oneself as attractively as possible and then seeds the situation with small deceptions, strategic retreats, and warm confidences. The desired outcome is never spoken of directly until it has been achieved, though all parties involved are painfully aware of it. Both activities are woven of silences, whispers, and meaningful looks. And—most significantly—the Chief Researcher, artificially maintained in an eternal prepubescence, appears to be immune to both."

"I think—"

Abruptly, a nymph stepped out into the road before them and stood, hands on hips, blocking their way.

Darger, quick-thinking as ever, swept off his hat and bowed deeply. "My dear Miss! You must think me a dreadful person, but in all the excitement last night, I failed to discover your name. If you would be so merciful as to bestow upon me that knowledge and your forgiveness . . . and a smile . . . I would be the happiest man on earth."

A smile tugged at one corner of the nymph's mouth, but she scowled it

down. "Call me Anya. But I'm not here to talk about myself, but about Theodosia. I'm used to the ways of men, but she is not. You were her first."

"You mean she was a . . . ?" Darger asked, shocked.

"With my brothers and cousins and uncles around? Not likely! There's not a girl in Arcadia who keeps her hymen a day longer than she desires it. But you were her first *human* male. That's special to a lass."

"I feel honored, of course. But what is it specifically that you are asking me?"

"Just—" her finger tapped his chest—"watch it! Theodosia is a good friend of mine. I'll not have her hurt." And, so saying, she flounced back into the forest and was gone.

"Well!" Surplus said. "Further proof, if any were needed, that women remain beyond the comprehension of men."

"Interestingly enough, I had exactly this conversation with a woman friend of mine some years ago," Darger said, staring off into the green shadows, "and she assured me that women find men equally baffling. It may be that the problem lies not in gender but in human nature itself."

"But surely—" Surplus began.

So discoursing, they wended their way home.

A few days later, Darger and Surplus were making their preparations to leave—and arguing over whether to head straight for Moscow or to make a side-trip to Prague—when Eris, the goddess of discord, came stalking through the center of town, leaving fights and arguments in her wake.

Darger was lying fully clothed atop his bed, savoring the smell of flowers, when he heard the first angry noises. Theodosia had filled the room with vases of hyacinths as an apology because she and Anya had to drive to a nearby duck farm to pick up several new eider-down mattresses for the inn, and as a promise that they would not be over-late coming to him. He jumped up and saw the spreading violence from the window. Making a hasty grab for the box of patches they had purloined from the monastery, he slapped one on his neck.

He was going to bring a patch to Surplus's room, when the door flew open, and that same worthy rushed in, seized him, and slammed him into the wall.

"You false friend!" Surplus growled. "You smiling, scheming . . . anthropocentrist!"

Darger could not respond. His friend's paws were about his neck, choking him. Surplus was in a frenzy, due possibly to his superior olfactory senses, and there was no hope of talking sense into him.

To Darger's lasting regret, his childhood had not been one of privilege and gentility, but spent in the rough-and-tumble slums of Mayfair. There, perforce, he had learned to defend himself with his fists. Now, for a silver lining, he found those deplorable skills useful.

Quickly, he brought up his forearms, crossed at the wrists, between Surplus's arms. Then, all in one motion, he thrust his arms outward, to force his friend's paws from his throat. Simultaneously, he brought up one knee between Surplus's legs as hard as he could.

Surplus gasped, and reflexively clutched his wounded part.

A shove sent Surplus to the floor. Darger pinned him.

Now, however, a new problem arose. Where to put the patch. Surplus was covered with fur, head to foot. Darger thought back to their first receiving the patches, twisted around one arm, and found a small bald spot just beneath the paw, on his wrist.

A motion, and it was done.

"They're worse than football hooligans," Surplus commented. Somebody had dumped a wagon-load of hay in the town square and set it ablaze. By its unsteady light could be seen small knots of townsfolk wandering the streets, looking for trouble and, often enough, finding it. Darger and Surplus had doused their own room's lights, so they could observe without drawing attention to themselves.

"Not so, dear friend, for such ruffians go to the matches *intending* trouble, while these poor souls . . ." His words were cut off by the rattle of a wagon on the street below.

It was Theodosia and Anya, returned from their chore. But before Darger could cry out a warning, several men rushed toward them with threatening shouts and upraised fists. Alarmed, Theodosia gestured menacingly with her whip for them to keep back. But one of their number rushed forward, grabbed the whip, and yanked her off the wagon.

"Theodosia!" Darger cried in horror.

Surplus leaped to the windowsill and gallantly launched himself into space, toward the wagon load of mattresses. Darger, who had a touch of acrophobia and had once broken a leg performing a similar stunt, pounded down the stairs.

There were only five thugs in the attacking group, which explained why they were so perturbed when Darger burst from the inn, shouting and wielding his walking stick as if it were a cudgel and Surplus suddenly popped up from within the wagon, teeth bared and fur all a-hackle. Then Anya regained the whip and laid about her, left and right, with a good will.

The rioters scattered like pigeons.

When they were gone, Anya turned on Darger. "You *knew* something like this was going to happen!" she cried. "Why didn't you warn anybody?"

"I did! Repeatedly! You laughed in my face!"

"There is a time for lovers' spats," Surplus said firmly, "and this is not it. This young lady is unconscious; help me lift her into the wagon. We must get her out of town immediately."

The nearest place of haven, Anya decided, was her father's croft, just outside town. Not ten minutes later, they were unloading Theodosia from the wagon, using one of the feather mattresses as a stretcher. A plump nymph, Anya's mother, met them at the door.

"She will be fine," the mother said. "I know these things, I used to be a nurse." She frowned. "Provided she doesn't have a concussion." She looked at Darger shrewdly. "Has this anything to do with the fire?"

But when Darger started to explain, Surplus tugged at his sleeve. "Look outside," he said. "The locals have formed a fire brigade."

Indeed, there were figures coming down the road, hurrying toward town. Darger ran out and placed himself in front of the first, a pimply-faced young satyr lugging a leather bucketful of water. "Stop!" he cried. "Go no further!"

The satyr paused, confused. "But the fires . . ."

"Worse than fires await you in town," Darger said. "Anyway, it's only a hay-rick."

A second bucket-carrying satyr pulled to a stop. It was Papatragos. "Darger!" he cried. "What are you doing here at mycroft? Is Anya with you?"

For an instant, Darger was nonplused. "Anya is your daughter?"

"Aye." Papatragos grinned. "I gather that makes me practically your father-in-law."

By now all the satyrs who had been near enough to see the flames and had come with buckets to fight them—some twenty in all—were clustered about the two men. Hurriedly, Surplus told all that they knew of Pan, Eris and the troubles in town.

"Nor is this matter finished," Darger said. "The Chief Researcher said something about using Dionysus to stop riots. Since he has not appeared to do so tonight, that means they will have to create another set of riots to test that ability as well. More trouble is imminent."

"That is no concern of ours," said one stodgy-looking crofter.

"It will be ours," Darger declared, with his usual high-handed employment of the first person plural pronoun. "As soon as the agent of the riots has left town, she will surely show up here next. Did not Dionysus dance in the fields after he danced in the streets? Then Eris is on her way here to set brother against brother, and father against son."

Angry mutters passed among the satyrs. Papatragos held up his hands for silence. "Tragopropos!" he said to the pimply-faced satyr. "Run and gather together every adult satyr you can. Tell them to seize whatever weapons they can and advance upon the monastery."

"What of the townsfolk?"

"Somebody else will be sent for them. Why are you still standing here?" "I'm gone!"

"The fire in town has gone out," Papatragos continued. "Which means that Eris has done her work and has left. She will be coming up this very road in not too long."

"Fortunately," Darger said, "I have a plan."

Darger and Surplus stood exposed in the moonlight at the very center of the road, while the satyrs hid in the bushes at its verge. They did not have long to wait.

A shadow moved toward them, grew, solidified, and became a goddess.

Eris stalked up the road, eyes wild and hair in disarray. Her clothes had been ripped to shreds; only a few rags hung from waist and ankles, and they hid nothing of her body at all. She made odd chirping and shrieking noises as she came, with sudden small hops to the side and leaps into the air. Darger had known all manner of madmen in his time. This went far beyond anything he had ever seen for sheer chaotic irrationality.

Spying them, Eris threw back her head and trilled like a bird. Then she came running and dancing toward the two friends, spinning about and beating her arms against her sides. Had she lacked the strength of the frenzied, she would still have been terrifying, for it was clear that she was capable of absolutely anything. As it was, she was enough to make a brave man cringe.

"Now!"

At Darger's command, every satyr stepped forward onto the road and threw his bucket of water at the goddess. Briefly, she was inundated. All her sweat—and, hopefully, her pheromones as well—was washed clear of her body.

As one, the satyrs dropped their buckets. Ten of them rushed forward with drug patches and slapped them onto her body. Put off her balance by the sudden onslaught, Eris fell to the ground.

"Now stand clear!" Darger cried.

The satyrs danced back. One who had hesitated just a bit in finding a space for his patch stayed just a little too long and was caught by her lingering pheromones. He drew back his foot to kick the prone goddess. But Papatragos darted forward to drag him out of her aura before he could do so.

"Behave yourself," he said.

Eris convulsed in the dirt, flipped over on her stomach, and vomited. Slowly, then, she stood. She looked around her dimly, wonderingly. Her eyes cleared, and an expression of horror and remorse came over her face.

"Oh, sweet science, what have I done?" she said. Then she wailed, "What has happened to my *clothes*?"

She tried to cover herself with her hands.

One of the young satyrs snickered, but Papatragos quelled him with a look. Surplus, meanwhile, handed the goddess his jacket. "Pray, madam, don this," he said courteously and, to the others, "Didn't one of you bring a blanket for the victims of the fire? Toss that to the lady—it'll make a fine skirt."

Somebody started forward with a blanket, then hesitated. "Is it safe?"

"The patches we gave you will protect against her influence," Darger assured him.

"Unfortunately, those were the last," Surplus said sadly. He turned the box upside down and shook it.

"The lady Eris will be enormously tired for at least a day. Have you a guest room?" Darger asked Papatragos. "Can she use it?"

"I suppose so. The place already looks like an infirmary."

At which reminder, Darger hurried inside to see how Theodosia was doing.

But when he got there, Theodosia was gone, and Anya and her mother as well. At first, Darger suspected foul play. But a quick search of the premises showed no signs of disorder. Indeed, the mattress had been removed (presumably to the wagon, which was also gone) and all the dislocations attendant upon its having been brought into the farmhouse had been tidied away. Clearly, the women had gone off somewhere, for purposes of their own. Which thought made Darger very uneasy indeed.

Meanwhile, the voices of gathering men and satyrs could be heard outside. Surplus stuck his head through the door and cleared his throat. "Your mob awaits."

The stream of satyrs and men, armed with flails, pruning-hooks, pitchforks, and torches, flowed up the mountain roads toward the Monastery of Saint Vasilios. Where roads met, more crofters and townsfolk poured out of the darkness, streams merging and the whole surging onward with renewed force.

Darger began to worry about what would happen when the vigilantes reached their destination. Tugging at Surplus's sleeve, he drew his friend aside. "The scientists can escape easily enough," he said. "All they need do is flee into the woods. But I worry about Dionysus, locked in his crypt. This expedition is quite capable of torching the building."

"If I cut across the fields, I could arrive at the monastery before the vigilantes do, though not long before. It would be no great feat to slip over a back wall, force a door, and free the man."

Darger felt himself moved. "That is unutterably good of you, my friend." "Poof!" Surplus said haughtily. "It is a nothing."

And he was gone.

By Darger's estimate, the vigilantes were a hundred strong by the time they reached the Monastery of St. Vasilios. The moon rode high among scattered shreds of cloud, and shone so bright that they did not need torches to see by, but only for their psychological effect. They raised a cry when they saw the ruins, and began running toward them.

Then they stopped.

The field before the monastery was alive with squids.

The creatures had been loathsome enough in the context of the laboratory. Here, under a cloud-torn sky, arrayed in regular ranks like an army, they were grotesque and terrifying. Tentacles lashing, the cephalopods advanced, and as they did so it could be seen that they held swords and pikes and other weapons, hastily forged but obviously suitable for murderous work.

Remembering, however, how they feared fire, Darger snatched up a torch and thrust it at the nearest rank of attackers. Chittering and clacking, they drew away from him. "Torches to the fore!" he cried. "All others follow in their wake!"

So they advanced, the squid-army retreating, until they were almost to St. Vasilios itself.

But an imp-like creature waited for them atop the monastery wall. It was a small black lump of a being, yet its brisk movements and rapid walk conveyed an enormous sense of vitality. There was a *presence* to this thing. It could not be ignored.

It was, Darger saw, the Chief Researcher.

One by one, the satyrs and men stumbled to a halt. They milled about, uneasy and uncertain, under the force of her scornful glare.

"You've come at last, have you?" The Chief Researcher strutted back and forth on the wall, as active and intimidating as a basilisk. A dark mi-

asma seemed to radiate from her, settling upon the crowd and sapping its will. Filling them all with doubts and dark imaginings. "Doubtless you think you came of your own free will, driven by anger and self-righteousness. But you're here by my invitation. I sent you first Dionysus and then Eris to lure you to my doorstep, so that I might test the third deity of my great trilogy."

Standing at the front of the mob, Darger cried, "You cannot bluff us!"

"You think I'm bluffing?" The Chief Researcher flung out an arm toward the looming ruins behind her. "Behold my masterpiece—a god who is neither anthropomorphic nor limited to a single species, a god for humans and squids alike, a chimera stitched together from the genes of a hundred sires . . ." Her laughter was not in the least bit sane. "*I give you Thanatos—the god of death!*"

The dome of the monastery rippled and stirred. Enormous flaps of translucent flesh, like great wings, unfolded to either side, and the forward edge heaved up to reveal a lightless space from which slowly unreeled long, barb-covered tentacles.

Worse than any merely visual horror, however, was the overwhelming sense of futility and despair that now filled the world. All felt its immensely dispiriting effect. Darger, whose inclination was naturally toward the melancholic, found himself thinking of annihilation. Nor was this entirely unattractive. His thoughts turned to the Isle of the Dead, outside Venice, where the graves were twined with nightshade and wolfsbane, and yew-trees dropped their berries on the silent earth. He yearned to drink of Lethe's ruby cup, while beetles crawled about his feet, and death-moths fluttered about his head. To slip into the voluptuously accommodating bed of the soil, and there consort with the myriad who had gone before.

All around him, people were putting down their makeshift agricultural weapons. One let fall a torch. Even the squids dropped their swords and huddled in despair.

Something deep within Darger struggled to awaken. This was not, he knew, natural. The Chief Researcher's god was imposing despair upon them all against their better judgments. But, like rain from a weeping cloud, sorrow poured down over him, and he was helpless before it. All beauty must someday die, after all, and should he who was a lover of beauty survive? Perish the thought!

Beside him, a satyr slid to the ground and wept.

Alas, he simply did not care.

Surplus, meanwhile, was in his element. Running headlong through the night, with the moon bouncing in the sky above, he felt his every sense to be fully engaged, fully alive. Through spinneys and over fields he ran, savoring every smell, alert to the slightest sound.

By roundabout ways he came at last to the monastery. The ground at its rear was untended and covered with scrub forest. All to the good. Nobody would see him here. He could find a back entrance or a window that might be forced and . . .

At that very instant, he felt a warm puff of breath on the back of his

neck. His hackles rose. Only one creature could have come up behind him so silently as to avoid detection.

"Nobody's here," Bast said.

Surplus spun about, prepared to defend himself to the death. But the great cat merely sat down and began tending to the claws of one enormous paw, biting and tugging at them with fastidious care.

"Excuse me?"

"Our work now being effectively over, we shall soon return to Greater Zimbabwe. So, in the spirit of tying up all loose ends, the monks have been sent to seize the Evangelos bronzes as a gift for the Scientifically-Chosen Council of Rational Governance back home. The Chief Researcher, meanwhile, is out front, preparing to deal with insurgent local rabble."

Surplus rubbed his chin thoughtfully with the knob of his cane. "Hum. Well . . . in any case, that is not why I am here. I have come for Dionysus."

"The crypt is empty," Bast said. "Shortly after the monks and the Chief Researcher left, an army of nymphs came and wrested the god from his tomb. If you look, you can see where they broke a door in."

"Do you know where they have taken him?" Surplus asked.

"Yes."

"Will you lead me there?"

"Why should I?"

Surplus started to reply, then bit his words short. Argument would not suffice with this creature—he was a cat, and cats did not respond to reason. Best, then, to appeal to his innate nature. "Because it would be a pointless and spiteful act of mischief."

Bast grinned. "They have taken him to their temple. It isn't far—a mile, perhaps less."

He turned away. Darger followed.

The temple was little more than a glen surrounded by evenly-spaced slim white trees, like so many marble pillars. A small and simple altar stood to one end. But the entrance was flanked by two enormous pairs of metal lions, and off to one side stood the heroic bronze of a lordly man, three times the height of a mere mortal.

They arrived at the tail end of a small war.

The monks had arrived first and begun to set up blocks and tackle, in order to lower the bronze man to the ground. Barely had they begun their enterprise, however, when an army of nymphs arrived, with Dionysus cradled in a wagon-load of feather mattresses. Their initial outrage at what they saw could only be imagined by its aftermath: Orange-robed monks fled wildly through the woods, pursued by packs of raging nymphs. Here and there, one had fallen, and the women performed abominable deeds upon their bodies.

Surplus looked resolutely away. He could feel the violent emotion possessing the women right through the soothing chemical voice of the patches he still wore, a passion that went far beyond sex into realms of fear and terror. He could not help remembering that the word "panic" was originally derived from the name Pan.

He strolled up to the wagon, and said, "Good evening, sir. I came to make sure you are well."

Dionysus looked up and smiled wanly. "I am, and I thank you for your concern." A monk's scream split the night. "However, if my ladies catch sight of you, I fear you will suffer even as many of my former associates do now. I'll do my best to calm them, but meanwhile, I suggest that you—" He looked suddenly alarmed. "Run!"

Lethargy filled Darger. His arms were leaden and his feet were unable to move. It seemed too much effort even to breathe. A listless glance around him showed that all his brave mob were incapacitated, some crouched and others weeping, in various attitudes of despair. Even the chimeric squid had collapsed into moist and listless blobs on the grass. He saw one taken up by Thanatos's tentacles, held high above the monastery, and then dropped into an unsuspected maw therein.

It did not matter. Nothing did.

Luckily, however, such sensations were nothing new to Darger. He was a depressive by humor, well familiar with the black weight of futility, like a hound sitting upon his heart. How many nights had he lain sleepless and waiting for a dawn he knew would never arrive? How many mornings had he forced himself out of bed, though he could see no point to the effort? More than he could count.

There was still a torch in his hand. Slowly, Darger made his shuffling way through the unresisting forms of his supporters. He lacked the energy to climb the wall, so he walked around it until he came to the gate, reached in to unlatch it, and then walked through.

He trudged up to the monastery.

So far, he had gone unnoticed because the men and satyrs wandered aimlessly about in their despair, and his movement had been cloaked by theirs. Within the monastery grounds, however, he was alone. The bright line traced by his torch attracted the Chief Researcher's eye.

"You!" she cried. "British government man! Put that torch down." She jumped down from the wall and trotted toward him. "It's hopeless, you know. You've already lost. You're as good as dead."

She was at his side now, and reaching for the torch. He raised it up, out of her reach.

"You don't think this is going to work, do you?" She punched and kicked him, but they were the blows of a child, and easy to ignore. "You don't honestly think there's any hope for you?"

He sighed. "No."

Then he threw the torch.

Whomp! The dome went up in flames. Light and heat filled the courtyard. Shielding his eyes, Darger looked away, to see satyrs and men staggering to their feet, and squids fluidly slipping downslope toward the river. Into the water they went and downstream, swimming with the current toward the distant Aegean.

Thanatos screamed. It was a horrid, indescribable sound, like fingernails on slate impossibly magnified, like agony made physical. Enormous tentacles slammed at the ground in agony, snatching up whatever they encountered and flinging it into the night sky.

A little aghast at what he had unleashed, Darger saw one of the tenta-

cles seize the Chief Researcher and haul her high into the air, before catching fire itself and raining down black soot, both chimeric and human, on the upturned faces below.

Afterward, staring at the burning monastery from a distance, Darger murmured, "I have the most horrid sensation of *déjà vu*. Must all our adventures end the same way?"

"For the sake of those cities we have yet to visit, I sincerely hope not," Surplus replied.

There was a sudden surge of flesh and the great cat Bast took a seat alongside them. "She was the last of her kind," he remarked.

"Eh?" Darger said.

"No living creature remembers her name, but the Chief Researcher was born—or perhaps created—in the waning days of Utopia. I always suspected that her ultimate end was to recreate that lost and bygone world." Bast yawned vastly, his pink tongue curling into a question mark which then disappeared as his great black jaws snapped shut. "Well, no matter. With her gone, it's back to Greater Zimbabwe for the rest of us. I'll be glad to see the old place again. The food here is good, but the hunting is wretched."

With a leap, he disappeared into the night.

But now Papatragos strode up and clapped them both on the shoulders. "That was well done, lads. Very well done, indeed."

"You lied to me, Papatragos," Darger said sternly. "The Evangelos bronzes were yours all along."

Papatragos pulled an innocent face. "Why, whatever do you mean?"

"I've seen the lions *and* the bronze man," Surplus said. "It is unquestionably the statue of Lord Nelson himself, stolen from Trafalgar Square in ancient times by the rapacious Grecian Empire. How can you possibly justify keeping it?"

Now Papatragos looked properly abashed. "Well, we're sort of attached to the old thing. We walk past it every time we go to worship. It's not really a part of our religion, but it's been here so long, it almost feels as if it should be, you see."

"Exactly what *is* your religion?" Surplus asked curiously.

"We're Jewish," Papatragos said. "All satyrs are."

"Jewish?!"

"Well, not exactly *Orthodox* Jews." He shuffled his feet. "We couldn't be, not with these cloven hooves. But we have our rabbis and our shuls. We manage."

It was then that Dionysus began to play his pan-pipes and the crowd of nymphs and women from the temple flowed onto the former battleground. Surplus's ears pricked up. "Well, it seems the night will not be a total waste of time, after all," Papatragos said brightly. "Will you be staying?"

"No," Darger said, "I believe I will return to our inn to contemplate mortality and the fate of gods."

Yet Darger was no more than halfway back to town when he came upon

a wagon piled high with feather mattresses, pulled over to the side of the road. The horses had been unharnessed so they could graze, and sweet sighs and giggles came from the top of the mattresses.

Darger stopped, appalled. He knew those sounds well, and recognized too the pink knee that stuck out here, the tawny shoulders draped with long black hair that arched up there. It was Theodosia and Anya. Together. Alone.

In an instant's blinding insight, he understood all. It was an old and familiar situation: Two women who loved each other but were too young to embrace the fact in all its implications, and so brought a third, male, partner into their dalliances. It hardly mattered who. Unless, of course, you were the unimportant male himself. In which case, it was a damnable insult.

"Who's there?" The two women pulled apart and struggled up out of the mattresses. Their heads appeared over the top of the wagon. Hair black and blond, eyes brown and green, one mouth sweet and the other sassily sticking out a little pink triangle of tongue. Both were, implicitly, laughing at him.

"Never mind about me," Darger said stiffly. "I see the way the wind blows. Continue, I pray you. I retain the fondest memories of you both, and I wish you nothing but well."

The women stared at him with frank astonishment. Then Theodosia whispered in Anya's ear, and Anya smiled and nodded. "Well?" Theodosia said to Darger. "Are you joining us or not?"

Darger wanted to spurn their offer, if for no other reason than his dignity's sake. But, being merely human—and male to boot—he complied.

So for a space of time Darger and Surplus stayed in Arcadia and were content. Being the sort of men they were, however, mere contentment could never satisfy them for long, and so one day they loaded their bags into a rented pony-cart and departed. For once, though, they left behind people who genuinely regretted seeing them leave.

Some distance down the road, as they passed by the ruins of the Monastery of St. Vasilios, the pony grew restive and they heard the music of pipes.

There, sitting atop the wall, waiting for them, was Dionysus. He was wearing a peasant's blouse and trousers, but even so, he looked every inch a god. He casually set down his panpipes. "Bach," he said. "The old tunes are best, don't you agree?"

"I prefer Vivaldi," Darger said. "But for a German, Bach wasn't bad."

"So. You're leaving, are you?"

"Perhaps we'll be back, someday," Surplus said.

"I hope you're not thinking of returning for the bronzes?"

It was as if a cloud had passed before the sun. A dark shiver ran through the air. Dionysus was, Darger realized, preparing to assume his aspects of godhead should that prove necessary.

"If we were," he said, "would this be a problem?"

"Aye. I have no objection to your bronze man and his lions going home. Though the morality of their staying or returning is more properly a mat-

ter for the local rabbis to establish. Unfortunately, there would be curiosity as to their provenance and from whence they had come. This land would be the talk of the world. But I would keep our friends as obscure as possible for as long as may be. And you?"

Surplus sighed. "It is hard to put this into words. It would be a violation of our professional ethics *not* to return for the bronzes. And yet . . ."

"And yet," Darger said, "I find myself reluctant to re-introduce this timeless land to the modern world. These are gentle folk, their destruction of St. Vasilios notwithstanding, and I fear for them all. History has never been kind to gentle folk."

"I agree with you entirely. Which is why I have decided to stay and to protect them."

"Thank you. I have grown strangely fond of them all."

"I as well," Surplus said.

Dionysus leaned forward. "That is good to hear. It softens the hurt of what I must say to you. Which is: *Do not return*. I know what sort of men you are. A week from now, or a month, or a year, you will think again of the value of the bronzes. They are in and of themselves worth a fortune. Returned to England, the prestige they would confer upon their finders is beyond price. Perhaps you have been guilty of criminal activities; for this discovery, much would be forgiven. Such thoughts will occur to you. Think, also this: That these folk are protected not by me alone, but by the madness I can bring upon them. I want you to leave this land and never come back."

"What—never return to Arcadia?" Surplus said.

"You do not know what you ask, sir!" Darger cried.

"Let this be an Arcadia of the heart to you. All places abandoned and returned to must necessarily disappoint. Distance will keep its memory evergreen in your hearts." Now Dionysus reached out and embraced them both, drawing them to his bosom. In a murmurous voice, he said, "You need a new desire. Let me tell you of a place I glimpsed en route to Greece, back when I was merely human. It has many names, Istanbul and Constantinople not the least among them, but currently it is called Byzantium."

Then for a time he spoke of that most cosmopolitan of cities, of its mosques and minarets and holographic pleasure-gardens, of its temples and palaces and baths, where all the many races of the world met and shared their lore. He spoke of regal women as alluring as dreams, and of philosophers so subtle in their equivocations that no three could agree what day of the week it was. He spoke too of treasures: gold chalices, chess sets carved of porphyry and jade, silver-stemmed cups of narwhal-ivory delicately carved with unicorns and maidens, swords whose hilts were flecked with gems and whose blades no force could shatter, tuns of wine whose intoxicating effects had been hand-crafted by the finest storytellers in the East, vast libraries whose every book was the last surviving copy of its text. There was always music in the air of Byzantium, and the delicate foods of a hundred cultures, and of a summer's night, lovers gathered on the star-gazing platforms to practice the amatory arts in the velvety perfumed darkness. For the Festival of the Red and White Roses,

streams and rivers were re-routed to run through the city streets, and a province's worth of flowers were plucked and their petals cast into the flowing waters. For the Festival of the Honey of Eden . . .

Some time later, Darger shook himself from his reverie, and discovered that Surplus was staring blindly into the distance, while their little pony stamped his feet and shook his harness, anxious to be off. He gripped his friend's shoulder. "Ho! Sleepy-head! You've wandered off into the Emphyrean, when you're needed here on Earth."

Surplus shook himself. "I dreamed . . . what did I dream? It's lost now, and yet it seemed vitally important at the time, as if it were something I should remember, and even cherish." He yawned greatly. "Well, no matter! Our stay in the countryside has been pleasant, but unproductive. The Evangelos bronzes remain lost, and our purses are perilously close to empty. Where shall we go now, to replenish them?"

"East," Darger said decisively. "East, to the Bosphorus. I have heard—somewhere—great things of that city called . . . called . . ."

"Byzantium!" Surplus said. "I too have heard wondrous tales—somehow—of its wealth and beauty. Two such men as ourselves should do marvelous well there."

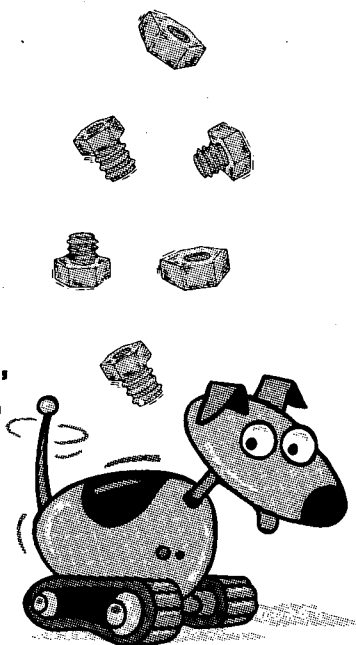
"Then we are agreed." Darger shook the harness, and the pony set out at a trot. They both whooped and laughed, and if there was a small hurt in their hearts they did not know what it was or what they should do about it, and so it was ignored.

Surplus waved his tricorn hat in the air. "Byzantium awaits!" ○

ROBOT DOG

**Burying the bone
beneath artificial turf
strips its gears
and damages its plastic claws;
peeing puddles of lubricant
eats away the carpeting.
The identification protocols
which keep the teeth
from hurting family and friends,
while protecting from burglars,
do not protect slippers
and the legs of the furniture.
Only when it begins to purr,
does the robot dog
go for reprogramming.**

—Roger Dutcher



Relling a Vatch, Redux

Thanks to a series of remixed omnibus collections issued recently by Baen Books, James Schmitz (1911-1981) has been experiencing a second, posthumous career. The author, while never a superstar of the genre, remains—as John Clute phrases it in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (1993)—“warmly remembered . . . [for] demonstrating, modestly and competently, that the template of space opera could provide continuing joy.”

Joy is an apt word to describe the emotions attendant upon reading Schmitz's whimsical masterpiece, *The Witches of Karres*. Originally appearing as a novelette in the December 1949 issue of *Astounding*, Schmitz's story about three psionically gifted young females and their hapless adult guardian met with immediate acclaim. For nearly twenty years, fans asked Schmitz to expand this work into a full-fledged novel, but he claimed such an elaboration to be an impossible task. In 1965, however, editor Sterling Lanier at Chilton convinced Schmitz to accept a contract and a monetary advance for the expansion, and, by 1966, the enlarged version of the tale miraculously appeared.

Set in a somewhat off-the-shelf future history where a generally featureless galactic empire is bordered by various lesser realms described in more pungent detail, Schmitz's tale derived its charm and allure not from brilliant, original ideation or

killer plotting, but rather from the winsome likeability of its characters. Captain Pausert, our hero, is both a competent, ethical man and a bit of a self-conscious bumbler. He can never manage a proper takeoff in his trading ship, the *Venture*; is dumped by his fiancée; and generally finds himself a square peg in a round hole on Nikkeldepain, the world of his birth. When he rescues three young girls from slavery on the world Porlomma, he finds—with a mixture of gratitude and horror—that his life has been yanked out of its boring groove. Maleen, Goth, and “the Leewit” are children of the mysterious planet Karres, doing a kind of *wanderjahr* far away from home. They each possess miraculous powers of the mind, relying on taps into the cosmic force known as “klatha.” Pausert himself seems to have leanings that way, and we learn later that his great-uncle Threbus is himself a “witch” of Karres. Unfortunately for Pausert and his charges, the klatha realm has its own mischievous lifeforms known as “vatches,” which can be sensed as they intrude into the human sphere with an intuition known as “relling.” One big vatch in particular has it in mind to strew Pausert's path with obstacles as a form of play. And as if that weren't enough, the menace of the Worm World threatens to destroy the whole galaxy. Only Pausert and his witches stand in the way.

Schmitz's expansion was seamless with the original, and ended with a completely satisfying conclusion. And yet, trailing lines of plot seemed

to hint at further adventures in store for Pausert and crew. But in the fifteen years of life remaining to him, Schmitz never followed up.

Now, almost sixty years after the original novelette, arrives a "sequel by other hands," in the form of *The Wizard of Karres* (Baen Books, hardcover, \$22.00, 313 pages, ISBN 0-7434-8839-3). It took three writers to match Schmitz's inspiration—Mercedes Lackey, Eric Flint, and Dave Freer—but I am happy to report that they do a very, very credible job. They are all plainly enthusiasts of the book, and know it inside out. Moreover, they pick up almost all the old threads deftly, while knotting new ones to them. They explain some lingering mysteries from the first book. They maintain the retro sensibility without being campy. They fuse their separate voices into one, and that one voice echoes Schmitz tolerably well. And they convey an attitude of having immense fun with their tale, in the manner of Schmitz himself. This sequel does honor to the original and gives us as much opportunity to enjoy favorite characters in new adventures as we are ever likely to have.

The new book picks up precisely where the old one left off, and with a bang. Captain Pausert, Goth, and the Leewit, along with their crew of two rogues—Hulik do Eldel and Vez-zarn—have contracted to ferry a Nartheby Sprite named Hantis and her companion, the grik-dog named Pul, from the hinterlands to the Empress's court. The Sprite is on a mission to prevent another galactic tragedy, a plague of body-possessing Nanites. But the Nanites have already infiltrated the Empire's military and secret service, and are determined to stop Pausert and company by any means possible. Ad-

ditionally, the successors of the pirate Agandar, whom Pausert killed in the first book, are after the *Venture* as well. Toss in a little uncatchable vatch who's more trouble than any big one, and the stage is set for a rollicking ride.

Because this basic plot of flight and chase is not complicated enough to sustain a book of the desired length, a long "snake's hand" (to employ John Crowley's term for a novelistic detour) in the middle is needed. For roughly a hundred pages, Pausert and friends go undercover in a traveling interplanetary circus. We meet a lot of colorful new characters and there's plenty of action and suspense. Yet the milieu is a familiar one, from Laumer and Brown's *Earthblood* (1966) through Vance's *Showboat World* (1975) to Longyear's *Circus World* (1981). I'm not sure Schmitz would have admitted of such a long detour, but once it's accepted as a given, it can be entertaining.

The action picks up once the circus is abandoned, and some vatchly time-travel intervenes. The three authors fill in the history of the Nartheby Sprites in fine science-fantasy fashion, generate some neat chroral paradoxes, and provide a rousing conclusion to the Nanite plague.

Do the characters feel authentic in their new adventures? That's what really matters in such a book. Yes, they do. Although Goth and the Leewit do not progress much beyond their portraits as first conceived by Schmitz, that's okay. Captain Pausert, being the titular character, undergoes more of a deepening. Toward the end of the book, the witches and burgeoning wizard find themselves ironically again on Porlamma, where all their travels once began. There are still wanted posters up for Pausert from his prior visit, but now

"the stern-visaged, planar-faced Aron [Pausert's pseudonym] bore no resemblance at all to the images of the cheerful criminal Pausert." He's come down a long road, and shows it.

Bravely, the authors also maintain the erotic subtext of *Witches*. Goth, a twelve-year-old, is in love with Pausert and steadfastly determined to marry him. This adolescent-adult romance—for whatever reason a kinky feature of certain SF, such as Heinlein's *The Door Into Summer* (1957)—perfectly encapsulates the mix of sophistication and naiveté that both *Witches* and *Wizard* revels in.

Eight Worlds, Plus Several More

It's hard now to convey the excitement we all felt, circa 1974-78, reading the short stories of John Varley. Picture the thrills and hype attendant today upon encountering the work of Ted Chiang, Greg Egan, or Charles Stross. Add those sensations together, and multiply by an X factor necessary to reflect the smaller, more concentrated mediascape that science fiction then inhabited. Do that, and you'll have a glimmer of the buzz young Varley generated.

I well recall my own early encounters with Varley's work—much of it appearing in the pages of *F&SF*, much of it in this very magazine—starting with his first sale, "Picnic on Nearside," in 1974. I was half-repelled, half-seduced by his stories. They all seemed too weird and wild: at once slick and raw, serious and comic, tragic and optimistic, a paradoxical mass of opposites. Too similar to real life, in fact, to be wholly comforting like so much escapist SF. Then there was the subject matter, much of which revolved around either sex or mankind's diminished

status in the cosmic pecking order, two areas known to evoke readerly trepidations. Moreover, Varley appeared on the tail of the New Wave/Old Wave controversies, and couldn't be easily pigeonholed as a partisan of one camp or another. He seemed to straddle the divide, part Heinlein, part Spinrad, and that was confusing as well.

But what no one could deny was that he had a unique, fiery voice and vision. This was a writer who had something to say and had forged, from the get-go, a vibrant and instantly recognizable personal style with which to utter his truths.

Now, thirty years after his debut, we have a perfect chance to reassess Varley's work in the form of *The John Varley Reader: Thirty Years of Short Fiction* (Ace, trade paperback, \$16.00, 532 pages, ISBN 0-441-01195-0). This book contains a massive sampling of his best-known, finest stories, along with five previously uncollected ones that stand up well in this august company. The whole assemblage is primo material, proving that Varley knew all along what he was doing, dragging semi-reluctant readers such as myself into new territories that were vital expansions of SF's remit, necessary for the genre to remain healthy.

Many of these stories inhabit Varley's famous future history known as the "Eight Worlds" sequence, in which humanity lives on various "steel beaches" around the solar system after having been exiled from Earth by aliens. Varley's proclamation of this scenario as a utopia of sorts is surprising at first, but soon borne out by the stories themselves. In these pieces, humanity still faces testings and problems and setbacks, but the species has turned the disaster of expulsion from Earth into a sil-

ver lining, exfoliating into many new and surprising cosmic niches. From the symbiotic pairs living around Saturn in "Gotta Sing, Gotta Dance," to the sex-swapping Lunarians in "Options," Varley's future citizens exhibit a brio and zest that belies their status as permanent expatriates. These stories add up to one of the best and most hope-inspiring portraits of mankind's indomitability and adaptability within the genre.

Outside this sequence, Varley proves himself masterful as well. Such award-winners as "The Persistence of Vision," a sensitive and alluring depiction of disabled humans creating an otherworldly culture, and "Press Enter■," a scary tale of cybernetic paranoia, propel the reader breathlessly through their lengths. Several stories involving the same protagonist, detective Anna-Louise Bach—"The Barbie Murders," "Tango Charlie and Foxtrot Romeo," and "The Bellman" (the last-named seen in these pages not too long ago)—fuse mystery-writing and science fiction seamlessly. Varley even pulls off a rare fantasy or two, with "Good Intentions" and "The Flying Dutchman."

Idiosyncratic as Varley is, it's obvious now in retrospect who we should chart as his forebears. Samuel Delany and Theodore Sturgeon for their emotional immediacy, and Heinlein for his lived-in "future mimesis," of course. A closer contemporary who seems allied is James Tiptree, for her blunt and necessary cruelty concerning the workings of an uncaring universe, as channeled by Varley in the fate of a young girl in "Foxtrot Charlie." (Varley even mentions that people assumed for a time that he was the real person hiding behind the Tiptree pen-name.) Exemplifying the burgeoning fascination of

1970s SF with feminism, Varley seems to have learned a bit from Joanna Russ as well.

But more fascinating is to chart Varley's influence outward. A cover blurb from William Gibson by itself would lead us to retroactively postulate Varley as a proto-cyberpunk. And the stories themselves adequately confirm this, what with their all-seeing Central Computers and frequent jacking-in rituals. The future-tech in these tales remains surprisingly au courant, despite the frequent mention of magnetic tape as a data-storage medium. Plainly now, something like Bruce Sterling's *Schismatrix* (1985) seems unthinkable without Varley's ground-breaking work. Some of Varley's more gonzo moments and hippie attitudes point toward Rudy Rucker's work as well. And every current postmodern space opera that features a spunky female pilot owes scads to Varley's female protagonists.

I should mention that all these exceptional fictions are buttressed here by some friendly and generous introductory material constituting a slim autobiography of sorts. Never one to seek a high public profile, Varley finally steps forth to share both personal and literary anecdotes, and proves himself to be as charming in that regard as are his stories.

Varley continues to write, of course, focusing on such fine recent novels as *The Golden Globe* (1998) and *Red Thunder* (2003). But the era of his debut, when he so perfectly encapsulated all the exciting potential of a genre in change, is gone, alas. Those of us who were lucky enough to live through it can recapture the excitement in this volume, while younger readers can experience excellent stories that have withstood the test of time. Unluckily for them, however,

they will not share in any of the potent nostalgia.

Zodiacs Unknown to Men

In hindsight, the publishing program known as the Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series, which flourished from 1969 to 1974 under the editorship of Lin Carter, was a seminal moment in the establishment of the fantasy genre. Publishing some sixty volumes, including older core texts by William Morris, Lord Dunsany, H.P. Lovecraft, and others, as well as newer works, this line of books proved that the earlier success of Tolkien was no fluke, that there was an umbrella term called fantasy—separate from science fiction—which could shelter many different types of non-mimetic literature, and that an eager audience existed for such novels. Unfortunately for the field at large, however, Lin Carter's catholic tastes and inclusive attitude were swamped by the waves of Tolkien imitators who shortly followed. The many different flavors of fantasy—Peake and Eddison, Hodgson and Mirrlees—were nearly expunged, and commodified fantasy ruled.

In other words, the history of the fantasy genre to date has ironically replicated the plot of *The Lord of the Rings* itself, omitting the happy ending. The heterogeneous forces of good and light were crushed under the fetid weight of the homogenous tide of profitable repetitiveness.

But lingering in the wreckage there were always survivors who recalled with fondness and aspiration the exotic glories that had perished. China Miéville and his New Weird movement, for one, represent nothing less than an attempt to restore the ancient kingdoms of authentic

arcane diversity that once existed in the literature of the fantastic. Many of this small band of crusaders imprinted as youths on the Ballantine Adult Fantasy titles and modeled their fictions not on Tolkien's but on the canon as preached by Lin Carter.

Recently, a new writer named James Stoddard showed exactly what could be accomplished along these lines with his two-book series *The High House* (1998) and *The False House* (2000). Deliberate and loving homages to the Ballantine authors, Stoddard's books stood out from the pack thanks to their unique settings, characters, themes, and plots.

Now comes one of the first books to pick up from where Stoddard—unfortunately little heard from in several years—laid down his grimoire. No, I'm not about to review Gene Wolfe's excellent duology, *The Knight and The Wizard* (both 2004), which also seeks to effect a similar rehabilitation/restoration of fantasy. The author of today's book is John C. Wright, known primarily for his recent SF trilogy *The Golden Age* (2002-2003), which exhibited many mythic overtones and a far-future technology that could pass for magic in certain lights. These hints should have led us to predict that Wright might eventually move in the direction of fantasy.

The Last Guardian of Everness (Tor, hardcover, \$25.95, 332 pages, ISBN 0-312-84871-4) is one of the few books I've seen in a while to come with its own author credo on the back dustjacket. There, Wright explicitly states his desire to produce a kind of fantasy that clothes eternal desires and truths in contemporary garb, citing Neil Gaiman and Roger Zelazny as models. Within this fine book—the first of a se-

ries—we will indeed see echoes of those two writers, to be sure, but also many clear traces of everyone from William Morris to H.P. Lovecraft.

Wright's premise is this: on the coast of Maine stands Everness, the High House, a nexus where the realm of dreams intersects with the waking world. For several centuries the Waylock family has been charged with inhabiting the High House and guarding the portal through which many nightmares would like to invade the Earth. At the current time, old Lemuel Waylock and his grandson Galen are the last guardians of this tradition. Peter Waylock—Lemuel's son, Galen's dad—has abdicated his responsibilities.

One night Galen hears the tolling of a dream bell that is portended to signal the final battle betwixt the empires of dreams and wakefulness. His grandfather is dubious about the validity of the signal, and does nothing. Galen is forced to venture deep into the territory of dreams, in search of the imprisoned spirit of Azrael de Gray, a traitor to the human cause who yet holds key information. While in the realms of Morpheus, Galen is trapped, Azrael gets loose on Earth, and the battle begins.

Drawn into the fight are two mortals who are more than they seem: Wendy and Raven Varovitch, husband and wife. Wendy possesses fairy blood, while Raven has been blessed by Prometheus himself. When their paths cross that of the Waylocks, they find themselves soldiers in a war whose existence they never suspected.

Wright does several impressive things here, all in a prose style that is simple yet resonant. First, he boldly assembles a hodgepodge, slapdash

mythos that lacks the scholarly consistency of, say, Tolkien's, but which simply feels right and which allows for spectacular "special effects." It's hard to diagram all the various factions among the supernaturals or assign logical places to them, but that's hardly the point when Wright's busy describing storm elementals tearing up the skies over Everness, or hordes of shape-changing seals swarming ashore to topple the walls of the last redoubt. We always see the players vividly, even if we're not always sure what side they're on, especially in the case of an elf named Tom of the Lantern.

The same can be said of Wright's fabulous dream geography, which is the best of its sort since Lovecraft's *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* (1955), an obvious influence. The sights and spectacles Galen encounters during his sleep journeys are riveting and fanciful, without being necessarily one hundred percent lucid. But that, after all, is the nature of dreams.

Finally, Wright invests his human characters with sparkling, charming, empathy-inducing personalities. From the wounded warrior Peter Waylock to the pixilated Wendy to the uxorious Raven—and even including the tormented Azrael de Gray himself—Wright's protagonists display a full range of emotions and thoughts while yet shadowing forth their mythic templates.

Wright's book offers much more than sheer weirdness and non-stop action, however. Rife with ethical and spiritual and moral issues, this novel truly seeks to use the fantasy form in deep and uplifting ways. The speech on page 302 by the Shining One constitutes some wise teachings that would not be out of place in an ancient tome by a Tibetan sage.

Like C.S. Lewis of old and Jonathan Carroll of late, Wright has the gift for conveying glimpses of other-worldliness through cracks in the pavement of reality.

Come Away, O Human Child!

First off, let's establish the gold standard for tales of the faery kingdom. I'd nominate John Crowley's *Little, Big* (1981), Yeats's "The Stolen Child," and Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Kingdoms of Elfin* (1977) as a shortlist of exemplary works that embody and radiate those virtues and pleasures we should expect from stories involving the fey. All three exhibit a kind of melancholy wisdom often tinged with rueful humor. All three evoke a multitudinous world running in parallel with ours. All three speak to ancient dreams yet remain contemporary. All three seek to blend opposites: mankind and nature, loss and gain, naiveté and experience, day and night, and so forth in the great catalog of dichotomies. Any new faery tales should emulate these models, in aspirations if not necessarily in form.

By this gold standard—let's assign it the value of ten on a scale of one to ten—the new original anthology by noted editors Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling rates, on the average, about a seven point five. Quite a respectable score as such projects go.

The book is *The Faery Reel: Tales from the Twilight Realm* (Viking, hardcover, \$19.99, 528 pages, ISBN 0-670-05914-5), and the first thing to note about it is the care and attention and generosity with which it has been assembled. Striking illustrations by Charles Vess grace the beginning of each contribution. A preface, introduction, and bibliogra-

phy establish a useful scholarly context for this type of tale. Story notes by the authors themselves illuminate the narratives. And the author biographies are comprehensive. The whole forms a handsome package indeed, a book that reminds one of how a little extra attention can turn a simple book into a splendid treasury.

Before discussing the (greater) merits and (lesser) defects of the seventeen stories and three poems, let me briefly describe them.

Charles de Lint, Neil Gaiman, and Nan Fry contribute the poetry: respectively, "The Boys of Goose Hill," "The Faery Reel," and "How to Find Faery." The first evokes an ecstatic dance, the second a torn heart, and the third the transformation of the mundane into the exotic.

Delia Sherman's "CATNYP" tracks fairies loose in the New York public library system. "Elvenbrood" by Tanith Lee describes a thwarted fairy abduction of a contemporary teenager. Katherine Vaz's "Your Garnet Eyes" is set in Brazil, and deals with a fairy of the sea. One of three Asian fairy tales, Gregory Frost's "Tengu Mountain" finds a traveler beguiled by ghouls, while Kelly Link imports Eastern European legends to America in "The Faery Handbag."

Steve Berman finds fey pickpockets on the loose in Victorian London in "The Price of Glamour." In the second oriental offering, "The Night Market" by Holly Black, we meet a love-besotted Filipino tree spirit. Bruce Glassco's "Never Never" riffs on Barrie's *Peter Pan* (1904), with Captain Hook as the abused protagonist. "Screaming for Faeries," by Ellen Steiber finds modern teens plagued by little people, while Nina Kiriki Hoffman's "Immersed in Matter" is set in a pretechnological past

and examines the plight of a fairy lad who loves mortal horses. "Undine," by Patricia McKillip, describes a water elemental trapped by her lover's political preoccupations.

In "The Oakthing," by Gregory Maguire, an elderly woman faces the assaults of World War One with only a diminutive tree creature for companionship. Hiromi Goto's "Foxwife" rounds out the trio of far-east tales by recounting what happens when a poor fisherwoman accidentally invades a fairy wedding. A.M. Dellamonica's "The Dream Eaters" is a futuristic noir about dream-stealing fairies. Bill Congreve presents an Australian slant on the kingdoms of elfin with his "The Shooter at the Heartrock Waterhole," in which a hunter slays a native sprite. Jeffrey Ford's "The Annals of Eelin-Ok" invents a new type of fairy, one that inhabits sand castles only. Finally, Emma Bull's "De la Tierra" is a cyberpunkish account of an assassin of fairies in modern Los Angeles.

I think you'll detect from the brief thumbnails given that Datlow and Windling have worked hard to present a variety of viewpoints and themes and tones and moods in this collection. We meet fairies in the past, the present and in the future. We get tales with happy endings and with sad. We alternate between stories that inhabit the minds of humans encountering fairies, and fairies encountering humans. We hear from writers with legendary track records and from newer voices as well. All in all, then, it would seem that this volume is incredibly heterogeneous. And yet in the end, to my ear, there's much of a sameness to 90 percent of the stories, and that sameness derives from the language employed and the limited symbolic or narrative role of the fairies.

First, the language. Most of the writers here adopt one of two styles. Either they are relentlessly contemporary—Link, Sherman, Lee, Steiber, Dellamonica, Bull, Congreve—or they fall into a kind of Anderson-Grimm simplified "old-fashioned" prose—Frost, McKillip, Black, Hoffman, Goto. Fairy-tale-speak, this latter style might be called. Both of these modes seem incapable alone of delivering the kind of impactful experience I alluded to with my gold-standard examples. Those who valiantly apply idiosyncratic styles—Maguire, Glassco, and Vaz—don't quite hit the mark either, but at least they provide a welcome change from the others. In Vaz's case, however, the floridity of the prose—I counted seventeen elaborate figures of speech in the first eight paragraphs of her tale—nearly overwhelms the narrative.

As for the more important matter of how the fairies are treated as plot tokens and symbolic effigies, I don't find the same level of compelling realism that I find in the gold-standard books. The fey here are mostly either used for special-effects value, or as symbolic stand-ins (the Steiber story is particularly egregious in its use of fairies as symbols of teenage sexual awakening). They're merely tropes. At best, they're exotic, outlaw personages akin to, say, Tarzan. Now, Tarzan could be majestic and alluring, but in the end he was merely human, lacking the preternatural aura of the gold standard fey tales. The way fairies are used here are entertaining, amusing, and dramatic—but they simply don't receive the kind of treatment that evokes the frissons of *Little, Big*.

The one story that redeems all this and illustrates the difference between inspired genius and mere

craftsmanship is Jeffrey Ford's. This mini-saga recounting the entire lifespan of one member of a new kind of fairy tribe, a race that inhabits the most temporary and forgettable structures of an oblivious mankind, encapsulates in a mere twenty-five pages the complete pathos of a Lord Dunsany novel. Ford's afterword reveals that he, to some degree, actually believes in fairies as a representative facet of the cosmos, not as mere ornaments or plot devices. It's this faith in the essential reality of fairies that irradiates his work, and reveals what the other stories, to lesser or greater degrees, are missing.

Jimmy Stewart Is Rolling Over In His Grave

The cute petite trim size of Christopher Moore's *The Stupidest Angel* (William Morrow, hardcover, \$14.95, 275 pages, ISBN 0-06-059025-4), along with its deliberately banal, goofy cover, might lead the unsuspecting reader to believe that he or she is confronting one of those joyous seasonal fables that proliferate a month or three before the holidays. Even the subtitle—"A heartwarming tale of Christmas terror"—could be construed by the non-ironically inclined as a *Reader's Digest*-style tagline for a wholesome saga of obstacles overcome on the path to a sugary Yule. But any reader so unwitting will instead find in this volume one of Moore's typically demented gonzo comedies, a book that can stand with the film *Bad Santa* (2003) and any number of episodes of *The Simpsons* for sheer bad-taste, low-living, unsentimental, satirical fun.

Anyone who recognizes Moore's byline, of course, will be prepped for

what's inside the innocuous covers. Since his debut with *Practical Demonkeeping* in 1992, down to 2003's *Fluke*, Moore has produced seven novels in total, each almost more funny than the last. Besides being a master of comedy—ranging from subtly witty to deadpan to gross-out—Moore is conversant with and respectful of the tropes of fantasy, horror and SF, employing them with brio and panache. *Fluke*, in fact, rivaled Rudy Rucker for sheer mind-bendingness.

This latest book, his eighth, is, I think, not quite the full-throttle successor to *Fluke*. It's slighter in substance and effect, breaks no new ground, and in fact recycles characters from previous books. (But then again, Moore has always done that, giving older characters walk-on roles in newer books, thus granting his oeuvre the cohesion of a shared universe.) *The Stupidest Angel* feels like a holding move before the release of a more substantial work, much in the manner that Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) served as a placemaker between *V.* (1963) and *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). That said, the novel is still a robust, solid piece of craftsmanship, delivering all the kicks its minimalist frame can sustain.

We return here to the setting of Pine Cove, California, a venue first encountered in *The Lust Lizard of Melancholy Cove* (1999). Pine Cove is the kind of town where the supernatural intersects with the eccentrically human, to unpredictable results. Our principal protagonists today are pothead constable Theo Crowe and his clinically insane but generally medicated wife, Molly Michon, ex B-movie queen. The time is five days before Christmas, and all hell is about to break loose, thanks

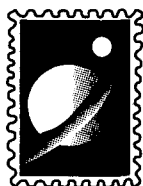
to a visit from the intelligence-impaired cherub of the title, Raziël, who happens to hail from Moore's novel about Christ, *Lamb* (2002). But before any extra-mundane fireworks, there'll be a murder, several failed love affairs, much drinking of alcohol and smoking of pot, Christmas-tree theft, and an appearance by a man and his pet fruit bat: Tucker Case and Roberto from *Island of the Sequined Love Nun* (1997).

In short, there's enough incident to fill three lesser novels, with all of the interlocking subplots recounted in Moore's patented blend of laugh-out-loud one-liners and rueful mock chastisements of the culture's excesses. But if you can't laugh at a zombie who proclaims that brains seasoned with gunpowder taste "peppery," then you're not Moore material.

The cleverest thing Moore does here, however, is to subtly and lovingly parody various Xmas classics. The way Theo and Molly sacrifice to buy each other semi-imperfect gifts recalls, of course, O. Henry's "The Gift of the Magi." The whole "evil developer" riff harks back to *It's A Wonderful Life* (1946). And the ritual celebration known to the Pine Cove folks as "Lonesome Christmas," with its improbably huge pine tree, echoes *A Charlie Brown Christmas* (1965) in wickedly skewed fashion. In its own mocking, jeering way, this book actually captures the real spirit of Christmas—a time of regrets, bumbblings, longings, disappointments, and stress that somehow often coheres into fondly remembered magic—better than many a "serious" volume. Touched (inappropriately) by an angel, indeed! ○

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- 27-29—**ConQuest.** kcscefiction.org. Airport Hilton, Kansas City MO. Joe Haldeman, Martin, T. Mather, the Roths.
- 27-29—**Oasis.** (407) 263-5822. oasfis.org. Radisson Plaza, Orlando FL. Jane Linskold, Steve MacDonald, Judi Castro.
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- 27-30—**WisCon.** sf3.org/wiscon. Concourse Hotel, Madison WI. Gwyneth Jones, Robin McKinley. Feminist SF con.
- 27-30—**FanimeCon.** registration@fanime.com. McEnery Convention Center, San Jose CA. Anime convention.

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- 3-5—**ConCarolinas,** Box 9100, Charlotte NC 28299. concarolinas@yahoo.com. Marriott Executive Park.
- 3-5—**A-Kon,** c/o 3352 Broadway Blvd. #470, Garland TX 75043. a-kon.com. Adams Mark Hotel, Dallas TX. Anime.
- 3-5—**Book Expo America,** 383 Main Ave., Norwalk CT 06851. (203) 840-5614. Javits Ctr., New York NY. Book trade only.
- 4-5—**Creation Days of Darkness,** 217 S. Kenwood, Glendale CA 91205. (818) 409-0960. Hilton, Burbank CA. Horror.
- 10-12—**DucKon,** Box 4843, Wheaton IL 60189. duckon.org. Holiday Inn, Naperville IL. Czerneda, M. Willam, Landis.
- 10-12—**Fan Odyssey,** 509 E. Mountain Ave., Pasadena CA 91104. info@fanodyssey.org. Sheraton, Culver City CA.
- 10-13—**Australian Nat'l. Con,** Box 345, Kingston TAS 7051, Australia. thylacon.com. Hobart, Tasmania. De Pierres.
- 11-13—**VulKon,** Box 297122, Pembroke Pines FL 33029. (954) 441-8735. Nashville TN. Limon, Leary, Hallett, Benz.
- 11-18—**Slayer Cruise,** Box 297122, Pembroke Pines FL 33029. (954) 441-8735. Caribbean Buffy cruise from Miami.
- 12-July 22—**Clarion,** 112 Olds Hall, MSU, E. Lansing MI 48824. msu.edu/~clarion/. Writing workshop.
- 13-July 22—**Odyssey,** 20 Levesque Lane #F, Mont Vernon NH 03057. sff.net/odyssey. Manchester NH. Workshop.
- 24-26—**PortCon,** 398 Long Plains Rd., Buxton ME 04093. portconmaine.com. Sheraton South, Portland ME. Anime.
- 24-26—**ApolloCon,** Box 541822, Houston TX 77254. apollocon.org. R. J. Sawyer, M. Wells, L. Martindale, B. Denton.
- 24-26—**Weekend in Sherwood,** 2536 Dundee Dr., Warren MI 48092. ce.et.tudelft.nl/~tizra/ros/. Southgate MI.

AUGUST 2005

- 4-8—**Interaction,** Box 58009, Louisville KY 40268. www.interaction.worldcon.org.uk. Glasgow Scotland. \$195/£110.

SEPTEMBER 2005

- 1-5—**CascadiaCon,** Box 1066, Seattle WA 98111. www.seattle2005.org. NASFiC, while WorldCon's in Glasgow. \$95.

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